

Scripture Passage: John 4: 3-15

Title: Become the Voice of the Voiceless

1.

It is quite enjoyable to take a walk around the church grounds nowadays. You can really feel that Spring is on its way, or is already here. Life that seemed so barren during the winter months starts to wake back up again, with purple peonies and yellow daffodils starting to bloom as if to greet us hello. Being the sentimentalist that I am, I couldn't help but offer a word of encouragement to the flowers that had endured the long winter so well, that I was grateful for their "holding on" through the long winter months. In the same way, I offer the same words of encouragement to those of you here today; I also encourage you all to encourage each other right now in this way: "Thank you for holding on through the long winter months!" I think the worst of the winter weather is finally behind us. I am sure that there are those of you for whom this winter was especially challenging, with unexpected challenges and trials that life threw your way in the midst of everything else going on. I am also sure that there are those of you for whom these challenges are still ongoing, and to all of you – I would like to offer a word of encouragement to keep holding on just a bit longer. I believe that the halcyon days of Spring are not too far ahead for you all. Indeed, to those who have endured a long winter, the joy that comes from welcoming Spring cannot be compared. In the same way, those of us reaching Spring after a long Minnesotan winter know that Spring is really a special time for those of us here in the Midwest. Of all the various regions in the U.S., the Midwest has perhaps the worst winters of all, but in return, it has the most verdant and beautiful Spring and Summer that I have come to know. Spring here is made especially more beautiful on account of the long Winter that preceded it.

When we read today's passage in verse 4, we see that Jesus intentionally took the road to Samaria. The verse itself states that Jesus "had to go through Samaria," but in reality, this is a reflection of a deliberate decision that Jesus made in his travel plans. In those days, there were three roads that connected Jerusalem and Galilee, which were the following: the King's Highway, the Via Maris, and the Patriarch's Road. The King's Highway was established by the King of Edom which required that a toll be paid. The Via Maris traced the coastline, and as such took a more circuitous route to get to one's destination. The Patriarch's Road, on the other hand, is a more direct route, but not an easy route to take as it required travelers pass through a mountainous region reaching up to a level of 600 m above sea level. And yet Jesus decided to take the Patriarch's Road and pass through Samaria. What was the significant behind his decision to pass through Samaria and meet with the Samaritan woman in the passage today? To explain all the details and nuances underlying the significance of the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman will likely take more than just a single sermon. As such, we will focus on the significance of this meeting, and we can see that this through the pattern of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. There are three motifs that come to play out here – the first is that of thirst and the living water; the second is that of the woman's many husbands, and the third involves worship and the temple. Today, I would like to focus on the motif of the living water and so explore the Lord's message for us.

2.

To understand the context of this passage requires that we know a little about Samaria and the Samaritan people – and the unique relationship that they shared with the Jewish people. We can clearly see that the Samaritans were looked down upon by the Jewish people to put things mildly, and we could even go as far as to say that the Samaritans were persecuted by the Jewish people, to the point that some Israelites would not even consider Samaritans to be people. How did this difficult relationship come about? The beginnings of this story trail its beginnings to the 10th century BC, during the days of King Rehoboam, son of King Solomon. Israel and Judea were separated into two independent nations – Israel to the north, and Judea to the south, in BC 931. Samaria was the capital of Israel to the north. In BC 721, Assyria invades and take over the northern nation of Israel, and subsequently introduces many foreign populations to the region of Israel. The purpose of this move was to simply “thin out” the blood of the Israelites and thus make them to lose their identity as a nation. In 2 Kings 17, it makes it clear that this consequently resulted in many sacred stones and Asherah poles (foreign idols) being set up in the land of Samaria. This resulted in the Samaritans not only losing their national identity, but also losing their faith wholesale as well. Eventually, the nation of Judea to the south also becomes invaded by Babylon and a period of the Babylonian exile follows. When the Jewish people are able to return to their homeland at the end of their exile, led by figures like Ezra and Nehemiah, they found that the people of Samaria had taken over the land and held significance ownership over the land – and these Samaritans were led by a man by the name of Sanballat the Horonite, who was infamous for actively opposing Nehemiah and his work to reconstruct the Temple. It is also understood implicitly based on Sanballat’s name which honored the Sumerian god of the moon “sin-uballit – meaning “Sin (god of the moon) gives life,” that his position likely also was religious in nature, in addition to being political leader of the Samaritans.

For the Samaritans, the only Scripture was the Pentateuch, written by Moses, which is why it is also sometimes called the Samaritan Pentateuch. There was a reason for the Samaritan only recognizing the Pentateuch as being holy scriptures. At the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the last book of the Pentateuch, we see the twelve tribes all gathered under Moses in Shechem, in the region of Samaria, to renew their covenant to the Lord. However, the Temple was established in the city of Jerusalem, in southern Judea. The Samaritans believed that Shechem was actually the epicenter for their religious worship of the Lord as this was where the covenant had been renewed, and used this claim to legitimize their own temple that had been set up in Shechem, especially after they could no longer travel to the Temple in Jerusalem after Israel and Judea had been split in two.

Moreover, approximately 150 years prior to Jesus’s coming, the Samaritans experience incredible tragedy. If you will recall, we have previously discussed an event called the Maccabean revolt, which occurred in BC 167 against the Seleucid Empire and Hellenistic influences on Jewish religion. The end result of this complex conflict was the rise of the Hasmonian dynasty which sought to consolidate its own influence – both political and religious. As part of this consolidative effort, the high priest John Hyrcanus who took a military campaign against the land of Samaria, resulting in the destruction of the Samaritan temple on Mount

Gerizim and the sacking of Shechem; he further enslaved many Samaritans and forced the Samaritans to adopt the Jewish way of worship, making it such that they could only worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans of course did not take lightly to this, and continued to resist but this ended in their slaughter at the hands of the Hasmonean dynasty. Such attitudes that looked down on the Samaritans as non-Jewish people who had been conquered continued into the days of Jesus, such that although the political structure that begun this attitude had since disappeared, such attitudes had remained. And yet Jesus decided to pass directly through Samaria, perhaps in direct defiance of his contemporary attitudes against the Samaritans.

3.

Jesus and his disciples left early in the morning, and managed to reach a town named Sychar in Samaria. This was a town which had been reportedly given to his son Joseph by his father Jacob, and had a well that Jacob himself had drunk from. Unsurprisingly, after a long day of walking and travel on the harsh mountain roads, Jesus found himself quite thirsty. And so Jesus sought out this well, and his disciples made their way into town to buy something to eat. It is at this well that Jesus runs into the Samaritan woman. In the cultural context of those days, it is quite awkward to have a man and a woman run into each other like this. Not only that, it is especially made all the more awkward by the fact that it is a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman. The Samaritan woman was well aware of these aspects, and so resists Jesus' initial requests for a drink of water. We must read into the nuance of verse 9, using the original language of the Scriptures to help us understand what is going on here. The verb "to be" in this verse is represented in the Greek through the term *eimi*, which not only carries the simple meaning of the verb, but also a timeless context that transcends the context of the usage alone – that is to say, the Samaritan woman is stating "how can *any* Jewish man ask anything of me, or *any* Samaritan woman?" Indeed, in Greek, the verb itself carries the pronoun for which it is used, such that pronouns such as he, she, it, etc are not needed – and yet, the term "sy" which rather directly carries an accusative tone, is used to emphasize the Samaritan woman pointing out Jesus. Not only was it odd that Jesus, a man, was requesting something of a strange woman, but that the Jewish-Samaritan relations of the times would make this request even more strange.

And yet in verse 10, through Jesus's words regarding the living water, the timbre of the conversation changes completely from merely a request from a man to another for a drink of regular water. Jesus makes it known that He has come to not only requesting a drink of water, but that He has himself come to parch the thirst of the Samaritans through the gift of living water, which is himself. Jesus also makes it clear that he is no mere Jewish man, but someone who had been sent by the Lord. Jesus knew that the actual person in need of water in this exchange was the Samaritan woman – that is, the gift of God in the form of living water. Jesus may have been parched in his flesh from his travels of the morning, but the Samaritan woman had been thirsty her entire life, such that the one requesting water had been reversed away from the one who actually needed it the most. To re-translate verse 10, Jesus is saying "I'm just a little thirsty, but you have no life left in you. Who among us should really be asking for water here?" Should I be the one asking you for water? Rather, you should be coming to me for living water instead!" Indeed, the gospel of John uses double-entendres to help illustrate critical points on many occasions, similar to how being "born again" to Nicodemus held many

meanings. The woman unfortunately only understands this living water to be a special kind of water, but Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit, who can fundamentally change and solve the thirst that comes from being lost and dead in sin. To understand this, we must turn to the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. In Isaiah 55 – it states “come all you who are thirsty,” and again in Jeremiah 2:13, it makes it clear that the Lord is the “spring of living water.” However, the Samaritans did not have the Scriptures of the prophets, and as such the metaphor of the living water referring to the Holy Spirit unfortunately went well over the head of the poor Samaritan woman, who rather comically inquires “you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?”

And yet the woman’s heart appears to have been moved at the talk of this living water, such that she starts referring to Jesus by the honorific “lord” (Kyrie), and drawn by her curiosity to see how much greater this Jewish man standing before her was, the woman begins asking if he is greater than her ancestors, going all the way back to Jacob, the founder of the people of Israel. If we are to re-interpret the nuance of verse 12, it would be “No way that even you could be greater than Jacob!” Jesus breaks this impasse through a declaratory statement, using the term “ego” referring to “I” – “Not even Jacob is greater – anyone who drink the water I give them will never thirst again!” Jesus makes it clear that He is greater than Jacob. Jacob may give water, but such recipients will thirst again; Jesus gives water that takes thirst away forever.

4.

Jesus uses the idea that our bodies physiologically require water for the maintenance of health and well-being – and the manifestation of need for water showing up as thirst to highlight the many ways in which the woman’s life in front of him had been broken to pieces. To put it another way, Jesus makes it clear that those without the gospel will always thirst as their lives are forever lacking in something critical and necessary for true life and well-being. Indeed, if thirst is a manifestation of our need for water, then what could be manifestations of things that we need for a “good life”? Many people think that their desires are representations of such needs. And so we always seek after such desires and think that getting these desires fulfilled will allow us to have good lives. And when these desires are not met, we feel unfulfilled or “thirsty” for such desires to come to fruition. Another minister put it this way – that $H = C/D$, or Happiness = Capital divided by Desire. Capital here refers to not only money or finances, but all the assets – relationships, skills, ideas, and so on that people may use to make their lives as good as they can make it. For most of us, as we go on with our lives, the amount of capital has increased – our salaries are often higher, our possessions are of higher quality, and our lives on the whole are better than what it was before. And yet, we are not necessarily happier than before. Why is this? The reason is that our desires have grown larger. No matter how great our Capital becomes, if our Desires are left unchecked, we cannot become happy

Jesus seems to be helping the Samaritan woman re-orient herself with respect to the direction that her desires should take. He tells her that the living water that he gives them will never thirst again. He is telling her that fulfilment of worldly desires will never allow her to fulfill desires that are fundamentally based on a different reality. Only when our spiritual desires are fulfilled will this fundamental desire that roots our existence become satisfied. We live out our

lives hoping that external factors or things will help us to meet the desires within us. The modern man lives this concept out so well – possession and expenditures that expand out to the nth degree in our never-ending journey to find happiness. For those of you who are homeowners – how long does the joy that comes from owning your own home last? How long does the high of getting something on your wish list last? At most, it may last a year or maybe even a few years – but in general, possession of things only provides fleeting joy less than a few weeks at best. And so our focuses become turned to another desire, and then another, and then another – and so, our thirst continues, for the fundamental thirst has not been parched.

The example of the Samaritan woman highlights a time immemorial problem that is so prevalent amongst the modern man, including a thirst for true relationships. God made man to be a social creature, and so it is not surprising that seeking out relationships to try to ease this thirst is a natural inclination. Indeed, the Samaritan woman tried this herself through many failed relationships with various men, unfortunately resulting in only conflict and worsening of her thirst. The philosopher Byung-chul Han in his work *Palliativegesellschaft* (The Palliative Society: Pain Today), he muses that for the modern man, the number of likes is a sign of both our times as well as an analgesic for the masses – the likes not only determine their presence in social media, but also in all aspects of popular culture. Nothing is allowed to cause pain or discomfort; not only works of art, but real life must approach the images presented in Instagram. The retort that we seek to make our lives look like our pictures on Instagram hit me particularly hard. Instagram, and other forms of social media – which began with their roots in trying to bring people closer together, have only added to conflict and divisions among us. Seeing how the others live in opulence and luxury have only added to jealousy and increasing comparisons between each other; and when we see such “picture perfect” representations, our desires only grow stronger. Our own posts become more aggressive, active, as if to say “Look at me – I’m living a great life too! Aren’t I great?” And we check obsessively to see how many likes our posts have received. We try to lie to ourselves that we don’t care about the number of likes or that such numbers determine our worth, but when we find the number to not meet our expectations, we find ourselves getting down. Leaving such apps for social media only makes us feeling drained and unfulfilled. And in this way, we continue to try to receive our only valuation – our own worth – from those around us. But this is not necessary – our worth and value comes from more than the valuation that others place on us. In this way, it is important to seek out a different way to direct our desires.

5.

Jesus reveals the purpose behind which he deliberately chose the harsh Patriarch’s road to reach Samaria. Samaria, for Jesus, was where His desires headed. His life’s work of empathy, seeking out the downtrodden, and seeking to heal those in need led him to Samaria, where Samaritans, who were deemed to be something less than man by their contemporary compatriots, resided in their neglected state. And amongst this neglected people, he sought out the most neglected individual – a Samaritan woman who had been divorced many times over – a woman so downtrodden to the point of tragedy. And in reaching out to her, Jesus transcended over the boundaries of his cultural heyday, at the expense of perhaps inviting misunderstanding and criticism. In his work of solidarity and hospitality, he sought out the Kingdom of heaven on

earth. The life reborn that came from above – the living water – was needed in equal measure by Nicodemus who stood at the height of Jewish society, and by the Samaritan woman, who perhaps lay at the bottom of such society; all needed the redemption and transformation that only the Christ could bring. Not even the Samaritans were excluded from the love of God – and in a way, Jesus was repudiating the genocide performed 160 years prior by John Hyrcanus and his ilk, in essence confirming that all were made in the image of God. And to affirm this calling, this ministry, Jesus deliberately chose to walk the harsh Patriarch's road to reach Samaria, which had been an inland island of sorts, surrounded and neglected. We see the ministerial intent of Jesus to transcend all boundaries and borders in this passage.

6.

Xenophobia refers to “fear of the foreigner or alien,” and in contemporary culture, it refers to an active perspective of prejudice against those from other countries. Such prejudice, or railing up such prejudices for their own ends is a tool frequently used by unscrupulous despots and politicians. This is antithetical to the work that Jesus came to earth to do, which was a work that actively sought out solidarity and hospitality. Prejudice and phobia results in a belief system wherein the “other” is a source of danger – something that must be eliminated for own safety and well being. We see this unfortunately rather frequently in modern day American culture, where many live in unfounded fear that immigrants and refugees will somehow threaten “the American way of life.” And yet many people who hold such beliefs have never encountered immigrants or refugees in their day-to-day lives. Such xenophobic tendencies have only increased since the 9/11 terrorist attacks over 20 years ago. This is now borne out in the election of representatives and politicians who hold ever increasingly aggressively xenophobic and prejudiced belief systems, resulting in a phenomenon that is well studied in Political Science called the “white flight” effect. Dr. Parker J. Palmer, an educator and activist, calls this white flight out, stating that there is no longer anywhere left for such individuals to go, and that it is now a requisite to learn how to live in a diverse society.

As I referred to earlier in the sermon, a small hobby of mine is the take walks on the paths surrounding our church grounds. There is a small fear that I always carry with me whenever I am on these walks – which is that I will not be welcomed by whoever might be on the receiving end of my greetings. Indeed, I have found that the neighborhood in which I walk is a predominantly White neighborhood, and although my greetings have been reciprocated in kindness, some people have coldly stared me down or made their displeasure known at the presence of an Asian male in their neighborhood. In this way, I have come to know what a blessing it is to meet those with a welcoming presence. Jesus, through his efforts to visit the Samaritans, transcended the barriers formed by the xenophobic tragedies that had taken place 160 years prior to his time, and in a way, Jesus went to the Samaritans to heal them of the trauma of their genocide inflicted on them at the hands of the Jews. I ask you all, dear members of the congregation, to actively seek to become those of a spirit welcoming hospitality and solidarity to all members of our diverse communities, regardless of their backgrounds or ethnicities. Such a welcoming spirit will surely help to break down the invisible walls that seek to separate us. A simple smile or waving of the hands at one another in greeting may not seem

like much – but it is an act that drives away fear – in both you and the other receiving such greetings.

We recently remembered the so-called 4/3 incident, also known as the Jeju Uprising Incident, during which time many innocent civilians were lumped in together with communist insurrectionists and were killed in a systemic genocide of sorts. This incident was suppressed from public record until the days of President Roh Moo-Hyun when the government ultimately offered remorse for their involvement in the incident. As Christians, we cannot sit idly by and become passive perpetrators of such genocidal acts, which stand in contrast to the ministry of solidarity and hospitality that the Lord has called us to. Moreover, the 10th anniversary of the Sewol Ferry Tragedy is coming up on 04/16. Despite the significant loss and pain endured by the families of the victims, there are now calls for the public to start pushing the incident to the back of their minds, indeed reprimanding the families of victims to essentially stop whining. There are even some who have taken offense at the specific colors used by the ribbons to commemorate the loss. Why is it such a contentious thing to weep with those who are mourning? Why must the parents of those students lost in this senseless tragedy be forced to move on even though they continue to endorse such grief; why would it be so controversial to stand with them until they themselves are ready to move on? I found myself so disappointed to see those within the Korean Christian community incriminate and disparage those in mourning instead of sitting with them in solidarity. Indeed, this is a tragedy that must never occur again in our homeland.

Art demands the Beautiful. Political idealism ultimately seeks the Good. Philosophy seeks after the Truth. For those who seek the genuine, the good, and the beautiful, our art, ideals, and philosophy are calls to us to become the voice of the voiceless. In our faith, the Lord Himself comes and presents Himself as one who is the Genuine, the Good, and the Beautiful. Indeed, Jesus went to the Samaritans to become the voice of these voiceless people who had lost their voices through the prejudices and discrimination of their times. Jesus made it clear to them that their lives were worth living. I pray that we too will become people who follow after Christ and so become the voice of the voiceless who have lost their voices through isolation, prejudice, and discrimination. I pray that we will all become those who transcend the barriers of separation to become a people of solidarity and hospitality, and thus continue to seek a world of peace, the Kingdom of God.