

We are working our way through John's gospel and today we finish off the story of a woman who met Jesus at a well. It is quite a long section, so we started it last week and we'll finish it off today. If you've been in church for any length of time, or if you were here last week, you might be familiar with the story known as The Woman at the Well from John 4.

If you are not familiar with the story, let me summarize it for you quickly.

**Jesus had to leave** Judea in the south of Israel and head back north to Galilee because the religious leaders had taken note of his rising popularity and they weren't happy. Rather than risk a confrontation at that time, Jesus heads north to His home territory.

The normal route for any good Jew was to cross the Jordan, go up through Decapolis, then cross back over into Galilee. No good Jew wanted to go through Samaria. The Jews and Samaritans hated one another. The Samaritans were half-breed Jews, forced to intermarry with gentiles when Assyria captured the Northern Ten Tribes. During that time, they developed and expanded upon the Law of Moses, and they were constantly harassing those in Judea. During the time of the Maccabees, they sneaked in and desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem, so there was really bad feelings all round. Because of that hatred it was unsafe for a Jew to try to travel through the area.

That didn't stop Jesus. He made a bee-line to the town of Sychar in Samaria. His disciples went into town to get food and Jesus had an encounter with a woman no one--not even her own people--wanted to **have anything** to do with. To most, she was what we would call persona non-grata, an unwelcome person. But to Jesus, she was a woman in need of His love and mercy.

**They carry on** a conversation, and she's a little hostile at first. After she tries to distract Him using an argument about religious things, He does something that He didn't do in all of Israel—**He reveals** Himself to her as the long-awaited Messiah. **At this point** (Click to show - the Outcome), the disciples return, and they are upset to see Jesus carrying on a conversation with this woman, but they know better than to say anything. The Message Translation catches the unfolding **scene well**: "*Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked. They couldn't believe he was talking with that kind of a woman. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it.*" (John 4:27, The Message).

Jesus' followers can't believe their eyes! No one says anything, but they certainly communicate their disapproval! It is amazing sometimes what we Christians can communicate without ever saying a word, isn't it?

She rushes off and that's where we want to pick up this morning. **John 4:28** "*The woman took the hint and left. In her confusion she left her water pot. Back in the village she told the people,*" (John 4:28, The Message). She got it. Without saying a word the disciples communicated their disgust at the scene before them. Her reaction is natural, "she took the hint and left." Unfortunately, most of the time that would have been the end of the story. How many people have visited a church once to experience the disapproval of those who attend regularly? Thankfully, not with her. She was impressed by Jesus and she wasn't going to let his judgmental

followers **discourage her**. *“Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?”* (John 4:29, The Message)

Now when she uttered that first phrase, “Come see a man who knew all about the things I did” the people probably thought, “Huh, that’s nothing—everybody knows what you’ve been up to; everybody knows the kind of woman you are! All they have to do is look at you and they know!”

I think it’s the next two phrases that gets their attention, “. . . *who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?*”

I wonder if she already believed he was the Messiah but knew that if she went and said that nobody would believe her. Asking the question is more effective than making a statement. That’s where something like Alpha is so good - it allows for any question and gives permission to say, “I don’t know.”

Meanwhile, back at the well another scene is unfolding. *“In the meantime, the disciples pressed him, ‘Rabbi, eat. Aren’t you going to eat?’ He told them, ‘I have food to eat you know nothing about.’ The disciples were puzzled. ‘Who could have brought him food?’”* (John 4:31-33, The Message)

**“Jesus said,** *‘The food that keeps me going is that I do the will of the One who sent me, finishing the work he started. As you look around right now, wouldn’t you say that in about four months it will be time to harvest? Well, I’m telling you to open your eyes and take a good look at what’s right in front of you. These Samaritan fields are ripe. It’s harvest time!’*” (John 4:34-35, The Message).

Like the woman they didn’t want to associate with, they didn’t understand what Jesus was saying. He was talking about spiritual things, they were talking about earthly things.

From the woman’s point of view, the conversation has thrown her into happy confusion: she seems to regard Jesus as a cross between a fortune-teller and a Messiah, but at least it’s given her the energy to go and tell other people about him.

For Jesus, the turn the conversation has taken, and the woman’s reaction, have shown him that here, outside the boundaries of the chosen people, away from Jerusalem itself, there is a spiritual hunger which, however muddled in its thinking, is ready to hear what he has to say.

Let’s pause here to answer the “so what” questions of this passage. Sometimes I fear that Christians think that spiritual food comes only in the form of Bible Study, prayer and church attendance. I am not being critical, but since the Sunday School movement which began in the late 1800’s, most Christians have come to equate knowledge with discipleship. “If we only know more we’ll become better Christians.” But it is not enough to know more if it doesn’t impact our lives. “Jesus said, *“The food that keeps me going is that I do the will of the One who sent me, finishing the work he started.”* (John 4:34, The Message) And James, the brother of Jesus reminds us in James 1:22 if all we do is listen to the word, we are simply deceiving ourselves. **The Living Bible** puts James’ words well: *“And remember, it is*

*a message to obey, not just to listen to. So don't fool yourselves.*" (James 1:22, The Living Bible).

What is the first "so what?" Simply this, if you want to be in a growing relationship with Jesus, it is not going to happen if you are just taking in—it will only happen in you are giving out as well. *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* (James 1:22, NIV84).

The second "so what" is, the time to act is now. Not a year from now, not four months from now, not when you think the time is right. Jesus said, *"Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."* (John 4:35, NIV84)

Yesterday, some of us went down to the Prom Day event and hugged, did some craft and spoke to people. When I was growing up I would have thought that was a ridiculous thing to do - but two generations have passed since then and they're not in church, and they don't know anything about Jesus, they don't know the bible stories I was raised with. We have to start from a different place today because society has changed so much - people talk about pre-evangelism

Jesus is recognizing our ability to look at certain signs and seasons and predict what actions need to be taken. We have this amazing ability to see so many things so clearly, but when it comes to the spiritual, often we become myopic. The dictionary defines myopic as, nearsighted; unable or unwilling to act prudently; shortsighted.

It is so easy to fall into that trap. The gravitational pull of every church is inward and if we are not intentional, that will be our pull as well.

**In the universe** there are geometrically defined regions in spacetime whose gravitational pull is so strong that even light cannot escape the inward pull. We call these area's "Black holes."

Sometimes in the life of a congregation, when the gravitational pull becomes inward, the light of the gospel can't get out. We don't mean that to happen and we often don't think it is happening, but when the focus becomes inward, effective ministry becomes impossible.

If a congregation is not intentional in resisting that normal gravitational pull inward, it will not thrive in the long term. But the tilling of the soil and the planting of the crops is difficult, and because no immediate results are seen, there is always a tendency to want to give up; to quit and to stick to what worked in the past. We celebrate our past, but we need to plan for the future; we celebrate past accomplishments, but we dare not lose sight of the present harvest.

If you added up the number of people attending church in Prestwick you might have 1500. Not a bad number - but we have 5,500 people in our parish, never mind the rest of Prestwick. There are literally thousands of people in our community who need to be introduced to Jesus.

**A number of years ago**, a shoe company decided to expand their efforts into an impoverished area in South America. They hired a salesman and sent him into the

projected market field. The man was there two weeks when he wrote the home office and said, “Task impossible. No one in the area wears shoes! I am coming home effective immediately.”

Unbeknown to him, the company had already sent another salesman to the area to help him with the task. They crossed paths and when the second salesman got on the field he discovered the same thing the first salesman had discovered.

In the meantime the first salesman reported his findings to the home office who prepared to recall the second salesman they had sent to the area. Before they could however, they received this letter: “Please send me as much stock as you can! The opportunity is incredible! No one here has any shoes!”

So, do we see the community as unreachable or do we see them simply as untapped?

**Solomon reminds** us: “*If you wait until the wind and the weather are just right, you will never sow anything and never harvest anything.*” (Ecclesiastes 11:4, GNB).

I have to tell you, in our text, Jesus’ friends didn’t want to be in Samaria. Had the decision been left up to them, they would have taken the normal route, avoiding the area altogether. It wasn’t worth the potential risks involved.

Jesus, however, didn’t do that, and here they were. Then they found Him—their Rabbi, their leader—talking to a Samaritan woman, and if that wasn’t bad enough, it was pretty obvious to them that she wasn’t a very reputable woman either. Their reactions betrayed their thinking and that was enough to send her packing. Instead of getting into it, they tried to convince Jesus to eat something.

So, I have to ask us, are we going to focus on our own needs, or are we going to focus on the needs of our community?

While all of this is happening at the well, back in town the woman is telling her story to everyone who will listen.

Here is what happens next. Many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to Jesus because of the woman’s witness: “*He knew all about the things I did. He knows me inside and out!*” (John 4:39, The Message)

Jesus’ presence at that well didn’t draw anybody - if not for the woman, nobody would have known he was there - and neither is our presence here going to draw people. A sign won’t draw people, mailings won’t do it, social media helps but it is not what will ultimately bring people to Jesus. It is the witness of God’s people that either draws others to or drives them from Jesus. The inhabitants of Sychar went to see Jesus because of the witness of this woman. Some even made their own commitments to Him based on her testimony about Him. There are no short-cuts to outreach. All the letters, post-cards, signs, advertisements in the world are not going to substitute for relationships. If we are not excited about Christ, our community won’t be either. Who are you talking to about Christ these days?

They asked him to stay on, so Jesus stayed two days. A lot more people entrusted their lives to him when they heard what he had to say. **They said to the** woman,

*“We’re no longer taking this on your say-so. We’ve heard it for ourselves and know it for sure. He’s the Saviour of the world!”* (John 4:40-42, The Message). And that from people with whom no religious Jew would be caught dead associating!

So, what about us? Where do we stand? Are we like Jesus’ early disciples who are reluctantly going along with Him when we know we should have taken a different route? “Jesus, all our friends are on the Decapolis side of the Jordan, don’t you think we ought to stay there?” Or are we like the Saviour who had to go through Samaria because He knew the need was great there? He had to go through Samaria because that was the only way He could do the will of the Father?

How do we encounter the outcasts of this world? Do we reach out to them like Jesus reached out to us, or do we show our shock, and even if we don’t say what we’re thinking, our demeanour shows what we’re thinking?

**It’s 2017. We have** our own choices to make. Will we stay focused on the vision of a ripe and bountiful harvest field, or will we just make sure we are fed?

We must not give up because it’s hard or messy or we’re not seeing the results as fast as we thought we should see them.

The harvest is ripe. Jesus tells us that and He never lies. Satan, who never tells the truth tells us, people aren’t interested, or we’re not good enough, or don’t know enough, or that it’s someone else’s job. Who do you believe?

So here’s the question: if we wanted to create a church unchurched people love to attend, what would we need to do? What would a church like that look like? I’m not just talking about Sunday. To do that, we have to step outside our comfort zones—we have to go through our Samaria not take the safe route through Decapolis.

We step outside our personal likes/dislikes and encounter people who are nothing like us. We may have to forgo our own desires and put off the temptation to meet our own needs first, if we are going to follow Jesus.

This woman became the first evangelist to the Samaritans. Before any of Jesus’ own followers could do it, she has told them about Jesus and they have come to believe for themselves. They have given him the title, Saviour of the World. John frequently shows how people misunderstand what Jesus is saying, but he also shows that they sometimes break through, with little or no help, to a statement of truth so profound that it could almost stand as a summary of all that John is trying to teach. Jesus is the saviour of the entire world, and with this incident that process has begun - and it continues today through us.