



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Seeking Out the Lost

St. John 4:1-10

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This morning we're moving on to the fourth chapter of St. John's Gospel. John 4 is just as much about evangelism as John 3 is, but it gives a very different picture. In Chapter 4 we read about Jesus' encounter at the well in Sychar with the Samaritan Woman and it's hard to think of anyone or any situation that contrasts more starkly with his encounter with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a religious leader and authority. This woman was probably only religious by the skin of her teeth. Nicodemus was a Jew; she was a Samaritan. He was a scholar; she was uneducated. He was a man of the highest moral fibre; she was horribly immoral. He came to Jesus at night to protect his reputation; she came in the middle of the day because her reputation wasn't worth protecting. As James Boyce put it: "A great contrast. Yet the point of the stories is that both the man and woman needed the gospel and were welcome to it. If Nicodemus is an example of the truth that no one can rise so high as to be above salvation, the woman is an example of the truth that none can sink too low."

I think St. John put these two stories side by side for a reason—to make it clear to us that the Gospel is for *everyone*, no matter who they are or where they come from. But the story also contrasts with what we saw in Chapter 3 in other ways. Nicodemus sought out Jesus. Sharing the Gospel with people who seek us out is very different from sharing the Gospel with the people we seek out ourselves and that's just the sort of situation we see with the woman at the well—Jesus went looking for her and in that he shows us what our own seeking out of the lost should look like. He shows us what it means to *care for lost souls*; he shows us that we need to be willing to *cross*

*boundaries* for the sake of the Gospel; he shows us what it looks like to *connect with people* where they're at; and he shows us the importance of using those crossings and connections as ways to *communicate the Gospel* with people.

Look with me as John begins the story in 4:1.

**Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.** (John 4:1-6)

Jesus was travelling from Judah in the south to Galilee in the north. Samaria was the district that lay directly between them. John says that Jesus "had" to pass through Samaria. Technically speaking that's not true. Devout Jews—Jews like Nicodemus—usually took measures to bypass Samaria even though it meant a longer trip. Jews and Samaritans hated each other and no good Jew wanted to defile himself by contact with Samaritans. (More about that in a bit.) Jesus could have taken the long way around. Lots of people did and most people probably would have expected him to. And yet Jesus "had" to go to Samaria—it was *necessary* for him to go that way. Why? Because there was a woman there who was one of his people—one of his elect—she just didn't know it yet and he knew that he had to tell her.

What Jesus does here reminds me of a conversation I heard between a couple of guys a few weeks ago. It was mid-morning and yet one of the guys was in a rush to get going. He said he had to go down to Victoria and that he wanted to get there before late in the evening. His friend said something like, "Dude, what's the rush. It only takes a couple of hours to get to Victoria?" And the first guy said, "But I have to go over to Tofino on the way because I'm picking

up my girlfriend. I haven't seen her in, like, three months!" Friends, that sort of what's going on here. Jesus chose the inconvenience of travelling through Samaria because one of his people was there and he loved her, just like that guy I overheard chose to go to Victoria by way of Tofino because the woman he loved was there. Jesus shows us what it looks like to *care for the lost*.

We see Jesus was tired too. He went out of his way to find this woman and he was tired because of it. He made it to her town at the hottest part of the day. He could have gone there at a time more convenient for himself, but I think he knew when she would be coming to the well so he came at her time. Exhausted and thirsty, he sat down and waited for her. The disciples were hungry and they went off to get some food, but Jesus stayed at the well. He knew exactly when and where he had to be. And in that Jesus reminds us that if we're not willing to make sacrifices and labour for the Gospel, we're not likely to accomplish very much in our ministry.

We're often poor evangelists because we're lazy or self-centred. We all have our own Samarias—places we don't want to go. Or maybe we're willing to go, but it has to be when it's convenient for us—not in the heat of the day. We can't be bothered to cross the street to talk to a neighbour or risk the hazards of talking about Jesus with a friend or a co-worker or a family member. Sometimes we're just so focused on our own needs: on jobs, on family activities, on sports, on hobbies—sometimes even on Church—that we don't leave time for evangelism. Brothers and sisters, what that ultimately says about us is that we simply don't care that much for lost souls. We care more about the other things we're doing. But what's more important: your being made a little uncomfortable, your being inconvenienced a bit, or the salvation of a lost soul? We need to consider our priorities.

Jesus didn't *have* to go to Samaria. He was on a mission that would take him to Jerusalem where he would be crucified for our sins and open the way of salvation for the whole world—including that Samaritan woman. He

could have said, “You know, I’m already doing a lot. I’m going to sacrifice my whole self! That’s enough. I’m going to skip Samaria today.” But Jesus knew that even though his death makes salvation possible for everyone, it has to be *communicated to individual* people if they’re going to take advantage of it. He had to go and tell this woman.

And friends, it’s the same with us. The fact that you are here today and have faith in Jesus and his sacrifice at the cross is because someone at some point cared enough for you to share that Good News with you. Jesus cared for your soul and died on the cross for your sins, but he also sent someone to tell you about it and he gave you his Holy Spirit to open your heart to believe. As Jesus says in John 15:16: You did not choose me, but *I chose you.*” The fact that he cared enough to seek you out personally should inspire you to care enough about the salvation of others that you will seek them out and share the Gospel with them.

Next, caring for the lost will often mean that we need to *cross boundaries* to get to them. Jesus cared for this Samaritan woman, but as long as he stuck to carrying out his ministry among the Jews he’d never reach her. She certainly wasn’t going to come to him. He had to cross a boundary and seek her out. Look at verses 7 to 9:

**A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)**

There are even more barriers here than we might realise. First, Jesus was crossing a barrier in going to Samaria and dealing with a Samaritan. Jews did *not* have dealings with Samaritans. This went back about 750 years. When the Assyrians defeated Israel they deported most of the Israelites to other parts of their empire and then relocated other

conquered peoples to Israel. The few remaining Jews mixed with those resettled Gentiles, but worse still, those Jews mixed their religion with the religion and false gods of the pagans. Eventually the Samaritans developed their own form of Judaism. The Samaritans embodied everything that devout Jews did *not* do and because of that they were despised by the Jews. The rabbis taught that eating the bread of a Samaritan was like eating pork—it was the most unclean thing Jews could imagine. And yet Jesus crossed this barrier of religious, ethnic, and cultural hatred in order to reach this woman.

And that’s a second barrier: she was a woman. In that culture—Jewish or Samaritan—upstanding religious men did not approach strange women in public. Rabbis especially would lose their reputation for doing what Jesus did in talking with this woman, and yet Jesus was willing to cross this barrier too.

Finally, in asking this woman for a drink, Jesus crossed another barrier. Samaritans were unclean and that meant that everything they came in contact with was unclean too. A good Jew would never as a Samaritan for a drink of water because it would leave him ceremonially unclean. The woman herself was surprised: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” And yet Jesus crossed all these barrier because he cared for lost souls. Brothers and sisters, that should set an example for us. How often do we neglect to share the Gospel with people because we’re unwilling to go to them, because it makes us uncomfortable?

In Chapter 3, when he was talking with Nicodemus, Jesus said that many people do not believe because they love the darkness and hate the light. Here he gives us another reason why some people do not believe: they simply haven’t heard the message. And they don’t hear the message because they won’t come into our religious environment and we won’t leave our religious environment to go to them. I can’t count the number of times I’ve

asked someone if they’ve ever been to church or have invited them to come to church and they’ve laughed at me. One girl told me once—and she was only *half-joking*: “If I ever set foot in a church I would surely combust!” Many know they’re sinners and only think of Christians as do-gooders or “holy people”. They don’t measure up and are afraid of being looked down on by Christians—sometimes because they have been looked down on by Christians. Many people simply feel that they don’t belong in the same way this Samaritan woman would have felt that she didn’t belong in Jerusalem. People like this aren’t going to come to us to hear the Gospel. We have to be willing to cross boundaries and take the Gospel to them.

Now, third, notice what Jesus does: he *makes a connection* with her personally. Jesus could have jumped on her and berated her for her sins; he could have worked a miracle to show her he was God; but he doesn’t do any of that. He simply asks her for some water because he’s thirsty. He, the minister, humbles himself and gives her an opportunity to minister to his need. This is an example we don’t think about very often, especially when it comes to evangelism. We think that when we share the Gospel with people we have to show them that we’ve got it all together and that we’ve got it all figured out. We might share with people what a mess our lives were *before* we turned to Jesus, but we think that our message won’t be effective if we let them see that even with Jesus we’ve still got some problems or even some doubts. These are things we have trouble even letting other Christians see, let alone the people we want to reach for Jesus. I’ve heard other people say that they feel inadequate to share the Gospel because they’re afraid of being asked a question that they can’t answer. Just like Jesus was with the Samaritan woman, we need to be honest about our humanity. We need to be open with people instead of trying to hide our struggles and shortcoming. In many cases the reason that people have shied away from the Church is that they’ve been given the mistaken idea that Jesus is only interested in people who have it

all together. We need to be able to show people that we struggled with things just as they do. Sometimes it's the unbeliever who may have something to offer us—just as this woman had water to offer to Jesus—and through our honesty about our lives we make real connections with people.

In this case, Jesus' willingness to show his human need and to ask this woman for a drink of water gave him a direct opportunity to share the Gospel. He asked for a drink. She was taken aback and responded, "Since when do Jews ask for water from Samaritan woman?" You couldn't ask for a better setup! We can just see Jesus going on, "Since when would a Jew ask for water from a Samaritan woman? Well, let me tell you why..." We should be giving the unbelieving people around us those kinds of opportunities too, if for no other reason that they can see Jesus at work in our lives, but also because we're willing to show our love for their souls by crossing boundaries, moving out of our comfort zones, and making connections with people.

Finally, notice that all this leads Jesus to actually *communicating the Gospel* with this woman. Caring for lost souls, crossing boundaries, and making connections are all "pre-evangelism". They're things we should be doing, but we haven't really evangelised until we've *communicated the Gospel*. She asked Jesus why he would ask her for a drink. This gave him the opportunity to give her the Good News. Look at his answer to her in verse 10:

**Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."**

The first thing Jesus does is tell her of the gift of God. The reason we need to engage in evangelism is that people don't know the Gospel and don't know the gift that God has to offer them in Christ. Most people are bogged down in life, in their work and relationships and their sins. Having grown up in the Church and not being able to remember

a time when I didn't know the Gospel, it always amazes me that so many people don't even think about the fact that God *wants* to help them. In fact, in talking with people it seems that most people who aren't already religious in some way are resentful of God—they see Jesus as an authority to be resisted or a judge to be feared and avoided. They don't know about the gift of God. Brothers and sisters, you and I have the *privilege* of telling them about it.

God's gift is the heart of the Gospel and we see Jesus sharing it here and throughout John's Gospel: Jesus cares for your soul. He cares so much that he came from heaven and became man so that he could sit at the well in today's heat and meet you personally. He came to offer you the ultimate gift; through his blood your sins can be washed away so that you can stand righteous before God. He offers his Holy Spirit to live in your heart, to be a light casting out the darkness and leading you into new life. He offers eternal life: imperishable, glorious, and heavenly. And yet even greater than all those things, God offers you himself: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people. That was God's promise through Jeremiah, but through Jeremiah God also described his profound sadness for those who rejected his offer of life: "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13). The psalmist, though, speaks for those who have received and experienced God's gift in Jesus Christ: "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Psalm 16:11).

Friends, God has created us all with a need for him that nothing else can fill. On our own the best we can do is dig dry and leaky cisterns. He offers us true and living water in the person of Jesus, his Son. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). That's the good news. You and I have experienced it. The great tragedy would be for us to keep it to ourselves. And yet if we've truly experienced the living water Jesus offers, we should be inspired to care for

lost souls, to cross boundaries, and to connect with people so that we can share it with them. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21).

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you that even while we were your enemies, you loved us and sent your Son to die for our sins. Thank you that you sought us out and that you sent someone to each of us with the Good News of Jesus and his Cross. Remind us Father that you now send us out with the Good News so that the work of your Son will reach the lost people around us. Give us a love for souls, Father. Give us the eyes to see those in need and the opportunities around us to cross barriers and to make connections with the lost. And finally, Father, give us courage and boldness to cross those boundaries, to make those connections, and to share your Good News. We ask this through him who died for us, Jesus Christ. Amen.