

“Intentional Authentic Evangelism”

John 4:1-30, 39-42

Rev. Liz Kearny

Longview Presbyterian Church

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When I say the word “evangelism”, I am well-aware of all that word may stir in each of us. I’ll tell you the first things to come to my mind: televangelists, who more often than not are less concerned with sharing God’s love than they are with lining their own pockets. Being stopped on the street by someone who doesn’t know me, and who isn’t trying to know me, but who wants to convince you that their version of Christianity is the right one. The signs on the highway asking whether or not I know where I’m going when I die.

God is big enough to take even the most misguided ways of sharing Jesus and bring beauty out of them. Perhaps God has used those evangelism techniques to get your attention. If so, I celebrate that with you!

But today, I want to suggest that we find in the conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus in today’s John 4 text a true picture of what evangelism, from the Greek word for “good news”, can be. Today, we will have a little reader’s theater as we enter into the text in scenes. Listen now for God’s holy Word from the gospel of John, chapter 4, beginning at verse 1...

Liz: Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’— although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—

he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, Dexter: 'Give me a drink'.

Liz: (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him,

Julie: 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'

Liz: (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

Dexter: '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.'

Julie: 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?'

Dexter: 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.'

Julie: 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

The first thing that strikes me about this encounter is that it is not a monologue. It is not a one way lecture where Jesus talks over this woman to make sure he gets his points across. This

encounter is a dialogue, a conversation, a back and forth that begins with Jesus making himself vulnerable - "Give me a drink", Jesus says, a thirsty man in the middle of a desert with no way to draw his own water from the well. Not even God with flesh on feels the need to jump into presentation mode. Even Jesus surrenders control as he and this woman get into a discussion about what it means to thirst, about living water, about a longing to not have to keep coming back over and over again to draw water from this well. Intentional, authentic evangelism is never a one-way presentation. It always arises out of conversations that are free from agenda, that begin with vulnerability, that open up space for imagining and true listening. It is at its heart *relational*. Let's listen as the conversation continues...

Julie: 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Dexter: 'Go, call your husband, and come back.'

Julie: 'I have no husband.'

Dexter: 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!'

In this dialogue, it seems that Jesus has very little interest in convincing the Samaritan woman of anything. Jesus' priority is instead to truly see her and know her. In a surprising turn in the conversation, Jesus encourages the woman to call her husband and bring him back to the well to find out more about this living water she has become so curious about. "I have no husband", she says in a moment of complete openness. 'You are right in

saying, “I have no husband”, Jesus replies, “for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” Theologians throughout history have taken this verse and used it to say that this woman must have been some kind of wanton seductress who was sleeping around with the men in her village and couldn’t hold down a husband. But historically speaking, that is what we would call a load of crock. In all likelihood, a woman in her situation, who was considered property at this time and place, had either been abandoned or left a widow by the 5 husbands mentioned by Jesus. A close reader of the text will notice that Jesus does not once condemn this woman for her marital history, nor is there any mention of repentance needed or forgiveness given. Because from where Jesus is sitting, this woman is a five-time victim of a patriarchal society that does not see her as a person, leaving her vulnerable to all kinds of physical, social, and emotional pain, and telling her in no uncertain terms that she is worthless and unlovable.

And this, I imagine, is why Jesus names her painful history out loud. Without any judgment, Jesus lets her know that he sees the long list of injuries that have been inflicted upon her by an unjust society. In naming her past, Jesus tells her that she is fully known to him, even the parts of her story that society has told her are worthy of shame. No convincing her of anything. No trying to fix her. Simply naming the incredible burden of suffering her village has placed upon her and sitting with her in the midst of it. We listen again as the conversation goes on:

Julie: ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’

Dexter: ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’

Julie: ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’

Dexter: ‘I AM, the one who is speaking to you.’

Liz: Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,

Julie: ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’

Liz: They left the city and were on their way to him.

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. 41And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.’ This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Some have suggested that in response to being so fully seen and known, the woman reacts in fear and changes the subject to a long-standing theological debate between her people, the Samaritans, and Jesus' people, the Jews. But I wonder if what's happening here is that this woman finally felt safe enough in this conversation with Jesus, the One who has seen her and known her so fully, that she takes a risk and goes right to the heart of the deep-seated and fiery debate between Samaritans and Jews. "Sir, I see that you are a prophet.", she says to Jesus. "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." This is not a cool, intellectual comment that will distract from the vulnerability she is experiencing with Jesus. This is *the* controversial question about how to truly encounter God that had borne a history of bloody violence between her people and the Jews. It's like the Samaritan woman is at Thanksgiving dinner and finally feels the courage to name out loud in the middle of dinner the finer points of that nasty argument that's been plaguing the family for years. And in this dialogue, this relationship, this space of safety and acceptance, this woman feels empowered to go there with Jesus, to not let him off the hook, to ask him the burning question that rises up within her when she realizes that he sees her and knows her so deeply.

And from that conversation of deep knowing and raw honesty, this woman becomes the first person in John's gospel to discover who Jesus really is. 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ)," the woman insists. 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' "I AM, the one who is speaking to you,"

says Jesus, sharing his identity in the same way God shared it with Moses through the burning bush so long ago. "I AM."

We don't know the Messiah this woman was expecting, but the Messiah she met that day was God with flesh on, vulnerable before her in need of water, embracing her with all the wounds society had inflicted upon her, making a safe space to go to difficult and raw places in conversation. This is how Jesus chooses to reveal his identity for the first time in John's gospel: Through authentic dialogue, with intentional listening and holding another person's story, by making space for the real, raw conversations of life.

Where in your life are there opportunities for these kinds of conversations to happen? I cannot think of a place where I have seen this more clearly than one of our mission partners, Hagar's Community Church, a new worshipping community of our own presbytery for women who are incarcerated in the Washington Corrections Center for Women in Gig Harbor, WA. Nothing about partaking in Bible study or worship on Saturday nights is about lecturing or monologuing or convincing. The whole evening begins with the dialogue of Bible study, where women are invited to wrestle with a particular book of the Bible and then ask questions together, going back and forth, sharing vulnerably from their own life experiences. There are opportunities every week where women can come to group pastoral care sessions, not a place to be convinced of who Jesus is, but to meet Jesus through Pastor Lane and the other women who take time to really listen to their stories, to truly see and know who these women are. I've heard some participants joke that women come to worship at Hagar's just for the delicious, fresh sourdough bread that is

shared at communion every week. They come because they are hungry and thirsty, as we all are if we are honest. Hagar's Community Church is such a beautiful picture of what intentional, authentic evangelism is at its very heart - a space where folks can gather exactly as they are, with their questions and doubts and raw histories fully welcomed and seen, where they can be fed with the body of Christ even if they don't fully understand the mystery of the God who is feeding them.

It's worth noting that the Samaritan woman at the well is the very first preacher of the Gospel in the book of John. And I find such deep comfort in the word she preaches to her village: 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' Even though she's had this transformative encounter with the living God, she *still isn't sure he's the Messiah*, kind of like eating the bread at communion and having no idea why it tastes so much like real grace. But she spreads this word of hope to everyone in her village anyway. Not because she is certain of it, not with any program or plan in mind, but because she is overflowing with a love that has changed her. She had gone to the well for water, but now she's a spring bubbling over with the water of life that cannot be contained. She does not need that jar anymore so she leaves it at the well. And she goes to her village to enter into open, honest, vulnerable dialogue with the folks she finds there, just like Jesus did for her. This is intentional authentic evangelism. It's letting the love you've experienced in Jesus overflow from your heart to those around you in the context of welcoming, agenda-free relationships, where even through our own doubt, we wonder alongside one another: "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Amen.