### “The Hour Is Coming” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Mar. 12, 2023

**John 4:5–29, 39–42**

5So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6Jacob’s well was there. . . 7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”. . .

9The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”. . . 10Jesus 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 . . . 13Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, 14but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never thirst. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” 15The woman said, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may [not] have to keep coming here to draw water.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” 17The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’ 18for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband” . . . 19The woman said, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” 21Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. . . 23But 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. 24God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” 25The woman said to him, “I know that when Messiah . . . comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” 26Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”. . . 28Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29”Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” . . .

39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony . . . 40He stayed there for two days. . . 42They 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 Savior of the world.”

Welcome to the First Church family. Be sure to join us after church, if you can, so that we can chat. Our gospel story concerns a woman was quite chatty with Jesus, and which evoked some of his most important teachings.

First I want to notice the setting, in Samaria, a people whom the Jews considered to be half-bloods, and their religion to be a distortion of the true religion. Samaritans observed the Torah, but did not hold to the prophets and the Writings, and were not under the control of the Jerusalem priests. Samaritans were among the early followers of Jesus, and among the members of the early organized churches that followed. The Fourth Evangelist, the author of the Gospel of John, affirms the legitimacy of the Christian Samaritans’ faith, showing that they were first drawn because of the woman’s testimony, but then learned for themselves when they stayed with Jesus for two days. The evangelist thus diminishes the woman’s role just a little, but it is still clear that her testimony was foundational and important. The evangelist seems to be giving an origin story regarding the Samaritan Christian population of his own day.

Spiritually, this passage is very important, because it offers teachings on true worship and on the nature of God. Narratively, it is important because it shows Jesus being both kind and revelatory to a foreign woman, paying no attention to either the ethnic or gender barriers that were in place at that time. In fact she is the first person to whom he announces his messianic status.

I find it interesting that Jesus launches straight into teaching as soon as he meets her, making an analogy between physical water and the living water that he offers. He offers her an end to spiritual thirst, telling her that the water he offers will “gush up to eternal life” (4:14). He then tells her some biographic information about her life, and that is when she figures out that he is a prophet.

And that’s when she tries to distract from her embarrassment by starting a theological discussion, talking about whether one should worship on Mount Gerizim or on Mount Zion in Jerusalem (4:20). Religious people often like to debate such theological differences, and she is offering something about which she thinks Jesus will enjoy talking. She wants to keep the conversation going.

But he is only interested in essential truth. Here is where he imparts two important truths: that true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth (4:23), and, further, that “God is spirit” (4:24). God is not physical, not material, and *where* we worship him does not matter, neither on this mountain nor on that mountain.

True worship is *spiritually* focused, understanding God to embody all the highest goodness, truth, and beauty. Worshipping with political pride in the locale where worship takes place is not worshipping in spirit and in truth, but in religiosity and in pride. Jesus has no interest in pride of place, nor in the competition between Judeans and Samaritans. It is the spiritual disposition of the heart that matters. The political map does not matter; only the content of the human intention.

Further, this is where he makes it clear that God is Spirit, not material. God is universal and real, not localized or under the control of human rituals or priesthoods. There is no Mecca in Christianity, no Kaaba stone, no Wailing Wall. There also is no all-controlling priesthood or brotherhood of imams who dictate what must be done or what must be believed, at least for Protestants. God is Supreme over all human claims, including claims about God.

That’s why there has to be a certain built-in humility in proper theology, a willingness to say “I may be wrong, O God, show me the way.” Or, as the character Elihu says in the Book of Job: “Teach me what I do not see” (34:32). We acknowledge the Infinite God, we pray to God, but we don’t presume to know everything about the Infinite God. Humility and teachability are central to this approach.

This encounter with the woman at the well is also interesting inasmuch as, when the woman mentions the Messiah, Jesus answers “I am he” (4:26)—not something he has said to the apostles yet. There is something about ordinary people that Jesus really loves. He gives one of his greatest self-revelations to this ordinary Samaritan woman who is chatting him up.

He apparently drew quite close to the whole Samaritan town, staying with them for two days, and they said later “we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (4:42). Jesus astonished his apostles by not being stand-offish either to women or to foreigners.

Jesus often draws very close to people, addresses them with friendly terms, like “daughter” or “friend.” He hears people’s sorrow, their mourning. When he saw the widow of Nain, “he had compassion for her,” Luke says (7:13). Matthew says “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36).

We see Jesus’ kindness on display in his conversation with the woman at the well. He made her a leader, really, in the proclamation of his gospel in the Samaritan regions. I imagine she had a prestigious and respected role in the subsequent churches. Jesus’ teaching turned her into a teacher, herself. Probably Jesus could read her character and could see that she would be capable of fulfilling that role.

This might be another example of how God chooses unexpected persons to be his mouthpiece, or, as Paul put it: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” (1 Cor 1:27). “Not many of you were wise by human standards,” Paul tells his congregation; “not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor 1:26). But ordinary people can carry the gospel message.

Ordinary people can get the point that worship needs to be spiritually motivated, and not linked to pride of place or of one’s own ancestry. Ordinary people can preach the message that God is Spirit, and not in any way material. And ordinary people can get the message that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah promised by the Hebrew prophets; who will be “a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6). However, they end up losing some of their ordinariness, because when people follow Jesus, they become extraordinary. Like John the Apostle, who lived to be a hundred years old, and became an extraordinary leader in his congregation. He would be carried out in front of the folks and would say “Little children, let us love . . . in truth . . . Since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 3:18; 4:11). May we, too, become extraordinary.