

COURAGEOUS

Introduction

- We are so hopeful for the future of First Congregational - who you are and who are becoming I work with many, many churches throughout the United States, and a little bit in Canada, and I find such hope for the witness of this place and your ability to adapt with joy and energy in the next season of your life. I don't see where you all are headed as a time of taking a left turn or adapting to what some might think are sexier church trends, but instead a deepening of who you have been.
- What we are doing in worship is exploring three core values that emerged during our previous time together. They are Curious, Creative and Courageous. The core values will become the basis for decision-making into the future.
- Please join us downstairs for our after-worship conversations. Steve Hirby is our liaison for questions.

Text: John 4:4-28

Jesus leaves Judea to head home. "But," John tells us, "he had to go through Samaria." Why "had to go," I wonder? Samaria not only was out of his way, it was also rough terrain compared with the coastal route to the east or the Jordan valley to the west. When he arrives in the land, Jesus is tired and is sitting alone by Jacob's well. What we see is Jesus leaving the easy route and going out of his way to connect with a people different from him.

Here we see in the text a woman who comes to the well in the heat of the day. Two things we know for sure about her. We know she is a woman. She lives in a world where men have almost all the power and women next to none. Physical power, financial power, religious power, political power....All she knows is that she's alone, unprotected and with a foreign man who is breaking established social boundaries. She's on guard...." No doubt that is true; and yet, at the same time, the lens through which she sees as a woman is a lens of extreme vulnerability or could we say courage.

I was always told that this woman was on the outside of her community, it is why she went in the middle of the day and not the morning with the other women BUT Scholar Amy Jill Levine points out that the woman is not an outsider in this text. The fact that she comes to the well at noon is not likely due to any kind of ostracism from the community but is part of the Gospel writer's narrative art. John wants us to contrast this Samaritan woman with Nicodemus in the previous chapter. If you remember, Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night so he won't be seen. The Samaritan woman comes at noon. The brightest of the day! Nicodemus, the religious insider to Jesus' faith, can't understand Jesus' mysterious claim about being born from above. The Samaritan woman, the religious outsider in relation to Jesus' faith, understands that Jesus is the light and goes and tells her neighbors all about it. This is courageous!! A woman going in the middle of the day to inquire about the source of life and a woman is being centered in the story as the one who is courageous. And can all the women say COME ON!!

ALSO Jesus says nothing about sin – We do not know why she has had five husbands and Jesus does not condemn her he simply holds space. She violates no legal code by living with a man not

her husband. “The only ones who condemn her,” Levine says wryly, “are those supporting a religion of power and patriarchy. Twisting the text to its desired end.

When we bring that kind of reading to it, we miss the playful innuendo that actually makes the story fun and reveals both Jesus and the Samaritan woman to be more interesting than we’ve allowed them to be. Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet at a well which brings to mind the place where Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for his son, the place where Jacob meets his future wife Rachel, the place where Moses meets his wife, Zipporah. The language is filled with sexually suggestive references – wells and cisterns, fountains and living water – the “earthy humor,” of antiquity as Levine calls it.

Here at the well, the place where families have been unified in the bonds of marriage, the possibility of the metaphorical union of Jew and Samaritan – mutual despisers of each other – is playfully posited. Here at the well, the woman, the Samaritan woman – the opposite of the elite insider – sees the possibility of who Jesus is and becomes the first evangelist not because she possesses a high education, is part of the religious elite... **but because she engaged a fellow human being in the moment. She didn’t shrink from an awkward conversation. She was courageous.** She engaged in questions that communicate “curiosity, interest in the other, a longing for understanding”. Here we see the contrast to a religious elite Nicodemus who uses his power and position to try and trap Jesus in his questions and a woman who is full of curiosity and asks from the motive of learning. How is it that you are even talking to me? she asks. Where do you get that water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?

What is unraveled in this text, then, is not the shame of a marginalized woman, but rather, our own assumptions. The assumptions that we’ve heaped on her, yes, but also the ones we put on Jesus. The Christ who we say was fully human, fully divine, but really, we treat as not fully human – possessing no sense of humor, allowing for no flirtatious impulses, no complexity of spirit, mood, or countenance, **leaving us with a solemn, ascetic, boring Jesus that we somehow believe is going to lead us to the beloved community of actual human beings.** It’s no wonder so many Christians feel guilty around him. I’d only want to come hear from him on Christmas and Easter, too.

What is unraveled in this text is not the exclusion of the Samaritan community, or the oppression of restrictive Jewish law, but the sin of our Christian tradition, projecting our prudish sexual mores, our oppressive view of Judaism, our grim views of Jesus onto this Samaritan woman at the well, when we could be celebrating the reality John is trying to reveal... in a culture of power and patriarchy. In and outs. Us and themes. Sounds much like today. That the first one proclaiming news of a new way of love is, a woman! a Samaritan! someone just minding her own business in the world who finds herself face to face with God-in-the-flesh is seen and is liberated! We could be celebrating how quickly this kind of good news could spread to people who are hungry for a relationship with the divine that leads to radical human possibilities, overcoming divisions, creating new connections.

But to do that, we’re going to need some awkward conversations, even between people who have been enemies in the past. We’re going to need more of the playful spirit of Jesus and this Samaritan woman, and less of the anxious spirit that is going around if we’re going to trust our imaginations to share with us the future that God programmed them to give. We’re going to need to relinquish our understanding of God as the one waiting to punish people for breaking rules, to shame them for having pleasure, and meet, instead, the God who shows up in places

of division ready to relate, to heal, and to give people what they need – water, community, courage, possibility, a future.

The Samaritan woman leaves her jar. She's tired of drinking from those same wells that do not satisfy. The wells of Division. Prejudice. Power. Jesus is shamelessly offering something different. She left her jar at the well. She was ready for it. Are we?

And what was the result?

I can't help but wonder if there is a clue for us in this last section where we hear that Jesus 'stayed there two days.' **Jesus made himself vulnerable by agreeing to be their guest** and in the resulting deepening of relationship, they were able to receive for themselves this marvelous gift of faith. I wonder what it would look like in our communities if we could find ways to allow ourselves to be 'guests'. Not coming with a position of power but simply showing up as a guest.

Courageous: We bring our whole selves—as we are and as we hope to be. We stand together with one another for the liberation of all people. We believe that each one of us belongs, because each one of us is a member of the body of Christ, beloved by God. This allows us to go forward, strong and courageous, walking together with God, boldly affirming the dignity of all people.

Sermon preached by Dave Harder at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
on Sunday, July 24, 2022 at 9:30 AM