

***“The Woman at the Well”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**March 19, 2017**

**Old Testament Reading: Exodus 17:1-7**

<sup>1</sup>From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. <sup>2</sup>The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” <sup>3</sup>But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” <sup>4</sup>So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” <sup>5</sup>The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. <sup>6</sup>I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. <sup>7</sup>He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

**New Testament Reading: John 4:4-42**

<sup>5</sup>So he [Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. <sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup>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.” <sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” <sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>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.”



**Sermon: “The Woman at the Well”**

Like many of you, I grew up in the church and was taught that God loves everyone. John 3:16 says “God so loved *the world*...” <sup>1st</sup> John 4 reads “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does

not know God, for *God is love*.<sup>1</sup> Jesus says that the greatest law of them all is that we love God and our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Now it's easy for God to love us. We are all God's children and who doesn't love their own children?!? But it's harder for us to love each other because we don't always or even often see ourselves as being related to each other. We divvy ourselves up into groups. There's "Us" and "Them." We know "Us." We love "Us." It's "Them" we're not too sure of.

Part of why it can be difficult to love "Them" is because of the things "They" do and believe. Now Paul writes in Romans that "ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>3</sup> But we tend to be a little more understanding of "Us" when "We" fall short, and a little more critical of "Them" when "They" do.

Psychologists call this the "Fundamental Attribution Error." That is the tendency that when we see someone do something, to attribute it to their personality and not their situation.<sup>4</sup> If someone cuts you off in traffic, for instance, it can be easy to attribute that action their personality: "That guy is a jerk!". But their driving mishap might also be because of that person's situation: he is on his way to pick up his boss from the airport and he is late. The person who came off as rude to you in the grocery store might just be worried about a family member who is in the hospital.

Psychology professor Dr. Mark Sherman writes "Social psychologists have found that we make the fundamental attribution error about other people but rarely ourselves. When *we* do things, *we always* have a good reason. It's other people we see as defective."<sup>5</sup>

"We" get a pass. "They" are held accountable. We judge *ourselves* by our intentions. We judge *others* by their actions.

The problem for us here in the church is that our God doesn't see the world the same way. There is no "Us" and "Them," there is just "Y'all." And God loves us "All Y'all."

Now that doesn't mean God loves everything we do. Presbyterians, as good Calvinists, believe that everything we do is touched to some degree by sin, but we also believe that God reaches out to us in love; that God's primary defining characteristics toward all people are love and compassion and mercy.

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<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:7-8, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31, Luke 10:25-28, NRSV

<sup>3</sup> Romans 3:23, NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Sherman, Mark, Ph.D. "Why We Don't Give Each Other a Break." *PsychologyToday.Com*. Psychology Today, 20 June 2014. Web. 20 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/real-men-dont-write-blogs/201406/why-we-dont-give-each-other-break>>.

<sup>5</sup> Sherman, Mark, Ph.D. "Why We Don't Give Each Other a Break." *PsychologyToday.Com*.

You see, God loves us just as we are; but God also loves us too much to let us stay that way. So God forms and shapes us; urging, teaching, correcting to help us become the people God created us to be. If the Bible story tells us anything, it's that God is patient with people who continually screw up. Read your Old Testament and take note of how many times the people of God receive God's blessings and then practically fall all over themselves rushing out to worship idols and break God's laws. When we sin, God does not just throw up God's hands in exasperation and walk away. Were that the case, God would probably have quit on us a long time ago. When we fall short, God picks us up and helps us try again.

All of this talk about "Us" and "Them" and "Y'all" brings us to our New Testament story for today.

Jesus, hot and thirsty from a long journey, sits down beside the well of Jacob. The well is deep and the only way to get water from it is to lower a bucket. William Barclay tells us that usually travelers would carry a collapsible bucket made out of an animal skin for just this purpose.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the Disciples had taken it with them when they went into town to find supplies or perhaps Jesus didn't own such a bucket, but regardless, he was quite without a way to reach the water that was at the bottom of the well.

But there was a woman there and she had a bucket. She was using it to fill her jars with water to carry home for the daily rituals of cooking and cleaning. According to National Geographic, even today, for millions of women all around the world, their daily schedules revolve around the duty of traveling to a water source, filling heavy containers that weigh upwards of fifty pounds and then carrying them back home; sometimes repeating the task multiple times a day.<sup>7</sup> That's what this particular woman is doing when Jesus asks her for a drink.

For Jesus to reach out to her at all, would have been risky since in that culture, it was considered inappropriate for a man to speak to, or interact with, a woman in public who was not his relative. But that was small potatoes considering that the woman Jesus was talking to was a *Samaritan*.

Now you may remember that Luke tells a story about a *helpful* Samaritan.<sup>8</sup> The context of that story, like this one, is the generally negative opinion that most Jews held of Samaritans back then. You see, the relationship between Jews and Samaritans was characterized by deep-seated hatred and animosity. The source of this animosity dates to the time when Israel split into two kingdoms shortly after the reign of Solomon ended around 930 BC.<sup>9</sup> The Southern Kingdom,

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<sup>6</sup> Barclay, William. "The Living Water: John 4:10-15." *The Gospel of John, Volume 1*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 153. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenberg, Tina. "The Burden of Thirst." Editorial. *National Geographic* Apr. 2010: n. pag. *National Geographic*. National Geographic Society. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/04/water-slaves/rosenberg-text>>.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10<sup>25-37</sup>, NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Hobbs, T. R. "Rehoboam." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. Vol. 4 Me-R. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009. 756. Print.

which remained loyal to the kings who descended from David and Solomon, was called Judah. The Northern Kingdom broke away to form a nation called Samaria. The Assyrians conquered Samaria in 722 BC and many of the native Samaritans intermarried with the Assyrians and adopted their customs. For that reason, the Jews of the Southern Kingdom despised the Samaritans because they saw them as collaborators with the enemy, traitors to God-and-country, and racially impure.<sup>10</sup>

But their hatred of one another was about more than just petty racism. In his book “The Gospel in Parable,” scholar John Donahue describes the “hatred that existed between the Jews and Samaritans,” noting that as the Southern Kingdom of Judah tried to reestablish Jerusalem after their own defeat and exile, the Samaritans opposed them. When the Jews were at war with Syria, the Samaritans sided with Syria. And in the early first century AD, Samaritans scattered the bones of a corpse in the temple in Jerusalem during Passover, which defiled the temple and made it impossible to celebrate the feast.<sup>11</sup>

That Jesus, a Jew, would speak to this Samaritan woman at all was disgraceful; that He would request a drink of water from her was downright scandalous.

But the truly amazing part of this story is that Jesus goes further and offers to this Samaritan woman the living water of eternal life. And that’s the big news here. Jesus offers salvation to someone who would have been seen at best, as a person of no consequence and at worst, as human scum.

But that is the good news of the gospel; that God’s grace is big enough for everyone; that there is the water of life for all who are thirsty. Even “*them*,” whoever “*they*” are. God is like Oprah Winfrey: “*You get living water and you get living water... You all get living water!!!*”.

Now, I think we tend to hear this story and begin wondering, “Who are the women at the well today?”. Who are we ready to deny living water? There are certainly plenty of them to go around: people who look different from us, believe differently from us, and live differently from us. Who are the people with whom we make the fundamental attribution error, unfairly assessing their actions and not trying to understand their situations?

And that’s not a bad exercise. It’s good to reflect on the fact that Jesus’ offer of living water extends to everyone regardless of nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or political party. Jesus’ offer of living water is not contingent upon for whom you cast your vote, which side of any debate you stand, or what part of the world you call home. Jesus offers living water even to those we don’t like or trust very much.

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, Robert T. "Samaritans." *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. Vol. 5 S-Z. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009. 76. Print.

<sup>11</sup> Donahue, John R. *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988. Print.

But it's also good to remember that "We" are not as good and pure as we believe ourselves to be. The fundamental attribution error cuts both ways. We judge "Them" unfairly but give ourselves a pass... a pass which we don't always deserve. And so, this passage reminds us that we too, are the woman at the well. And that even to us, Jesus offers the living water of salvation.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well has lost some of its scandalous impact in the 2000 years between when it was first told and today. But what we can take from it is that God's love, expressed most fully in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is big enough for everyone; no matter their background, their brokenness, or their sinfulness. No matter how much we may hate or dislike, or distrust them, or they, us - the river of God's living water is deep enough and wide enough that we can all come and drink from it, and be satisfied.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.