

Lent 3 A Sermon
John 4:5-42
March 12, 2023

“Thank You for Being a Friend”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

So [Jesus] 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, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 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.) 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 woman said to him, ‘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?’ Jesus said to her, ‘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.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘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!’ The woman said to him, ‘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.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship God 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 God in spirit and truth, for God seeks such as these to worship them. God is spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.’ The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

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, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ 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. And 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 Savior of the world.’

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As a general rule, I don’t like sitcoms. I find that the jokes are trite and there’s just not enough plot to keep me interested from episode to episode. But, as they say, rules are made to be broken. I happen to love *The Golden Girls*. I know, it’s a bit cliché to hear a gay guy say that, but it’s true. It’s a great show. I learned that the show was actually inspired by a skit performed in 1984 by Doris Roberts and Selma Diamond, who were promoting NBC’s slate of programming. Based on *Miami Vice*, the duo presented *Miami Nice*, featuring card-playing retirees in Florida. The audience loved the spoof and the NBC execs began developing a show based on the idea.

Running for seven seasons, The Golden Girls taught us a lot about friendship – about being there for one another through life’s ups and downs. And it was hilarious. Knowing about my love of this show, a pair of New England Church folks once gave me a wonderful engraved bookmark that says, simply, “Thank you for being a friend.” Believe it or not, I think this morning’s text from John’s gospel has something rather profound to teach us about being a friend.

Traditional interpretations of this story, however, tend to focus on the enmity between Samaritans and Jewish people; the woman’s “questionable” character; and Jesus’ ability to look past the sin and see the person. One author summarizes it this way: “Knee-deep in sin, a societal outcast living in a time where there was no regard for females, she was the last person people would expect Jesus to spend time with. But our Lord intentionally chose this moment to meet and converse with this woman.”¹

There’s no doubt that Samaritans and Jewish people in the 1st century were not on the best of terms. Originally one people, Samaritans had remained in the land during the Babylonian captivity of Israel more than 500 years prior. When the exiles were finally allowed to return home to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, they rejected the assistance of those who had not been carried off to Babylon. Unable to participate in rebuilding their ancestral capital and religious center, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim. 400 years later, however, the forces of the Jewish High Priest and ruler John Hyrcanus reduced the Samaritan Temple to rubble, deepening the animosity between the two sibling peoples. The mountain, however, continues to be the holiest religious site for Samaritans to this day.

With regards to the woman at the well’s character, she is typically painted in a negative light – “knee deep in sin.” Married five times and living with a man who was not her husband, interpreters have typically assumed

¹ Alberta Vadnais. “The Woman at the Well,” BestDailyPrayer.org, November 9, 2022: <https://www.bestdailyprayer.org/bible-verses/the-woman-at-the-well/>.

that she came to the well during the heat of the day because her ungodly lifestyle had left her bereft of friends and unwelcome during cooler times of day when most people went for water. In case there is any question, Christianity has often interpreted the stories of its sacred texts through the lens of misogyny.

Typifying this approach, conservative mega-church pastor John Piper describes the woman at the well as “a worldly, sensually-minded, unspiritual harlot from Samaria.”² While Piper is not alone in his unfortunate judgement of the woman, neither Jesus nor the text itself indicate anything of the sort. We do however, learn that the woman has had five husbands and lives with a man who is not her husband. While the woman’s tragic reality tells us nothing of her character, it does tell us something of her circumstance.

In those days, when it was quite ordinary for young women to be married off to older men, it was not uncommon for the women to outlive the men and be forced to marry again – and possibly, again, and again, and again. At the same time, divorce was the sole prerogative of men. To divorce his wife, a man needed simply to drag her out of the house and say “I divorce you” three times and it was so. While he might have any number of reasons for choosing to do this, the perception of a woman as unable to conceive would have been chief among them. Finally, while Jesus explains that the woman lives with a man who is not her husband, he goes into no further detail. It seems at least possible that the woman lived with her father, her brother, or some other relative just to survive. We can’t know, but what we do know is that Jesus didn’t judge her – he simply stated facts. But he did something else too.

The woman in John’s story was alone – friendless at the well. Contrary to the social mores of the day, Jesus struck up a conversation with her – the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and anyone in the entire New Testament. Jesus saw her – her aloneness, her pain – he saw her and

² John Piper. “God Seeks People to Worship Him in Spirit and in Truth,” Desiringgod.org, April 8, 1984, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-seeks-people-to-worship-him-in-spirit-and-truth>.

engaged with her and she with him. Jesus didn't call the woman to follow him on his journey, as he had the other disciples. He met her on *her* journey.³

Remember when I told you that this morning's text from John's gospel has something rather profound to teach us about being a friend? Sometimes, we see those around us struggling or suffering. It's our impulse to evaluate their situation – to judge – and then to prescribe our remedy for their pain. It's our impulse to steer them into our ways of seeing things. It's our impulse to fix them. But Jesus shows us another way. He invites us to see the other person and join them on *their* journey rather than inviting them into our journey, our judgement, our advice.

Being a friend looks a lot like joining a person where they are and not forcing them to be where we are. As Sophia from the Golden Girls once said, "It's not whether you agree or disagree with somebody. It's whether you can be there for that person when they need you!" Want to have great friends? Be a friend. Want to be a great friend? Be there when they need you. Join them on their journey rather than forcing them on to yours.

And so, in the words of John O'Donohue

May you be blessed with good friends.
May you learn to be a good friend to yourself . . .
May you treasure your friends.
May you be good to them and may you be there for them;
may they bring you all the blessing, challenges, truth,
and light that you need for your journey.
May you never be isolated.
May you always be in the gentle nest of belonging.⁴

May it be so. Amen.

³ Cheryl A. Lindsay. "Give Us Water," UCC.org, March 12, 2023, <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-give-us-water/>.

⁴ John O' Donohue. *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.