

Third Sunday in Lent, March 12, 2023
“Circle of Love” (John 4)

We find meaning in aligning ourselves with a particular group, don't we? And we publicly advertise our commitment to that group because we want people to know where our allegiance lies. This weekend has provided us the evidence that this is true as we've watched our favorite teams participate in the ACC tournament. We wear our favorite team's logos and hang school flags in our yards. We support our teams on internet blogs, Facebook postings, and at any opportunity we can.

And it's not just sports related. We want people to know our association with other groups, like civic organizations. We're quick to share the good work our organization is doing in the community. Therefore, I believe we can conclude that there is a definite relationship between *inclusion* and *announcement*. In other words, when we are part of a group, we want to let people know our association and what that means to us. However, where our Christian faith is concerned, we sometimes have difficulty making that announcement. We are, sometimes, reluctant to offer witness and let people know of our association with the church.

Once there was a young assistant pastor just beginning his ministry in a new congregation. Fearfully, he agreed to call on a number of new residents in the community. Seeing that he was a bit anxious, the senior pastor suggested that he say a little prayer before approaching each house. Later he returned to the church office and announced that all the calls had gone wonderfully well. *I prayed before approaching each house, just like you suggested, and my prayers were answered. No one was at home!*

How many times are we like this new pastor, praying that opportunities for witness will pass us by? Maybe we have a fear of sharing our faith, that we'll somehow be ridiculed because of it. Maybe we find it difficult to communicate such personal feelings. Maybe we have feelings of inadequacy or are intimidated. But why is there so much more enthusiasm for the college basketball teams we support and the civic and professional groups to which we belong than there is about our inclusion in the church?

Perhaps we can gain a new perspective from our gospel today as we see how Jesus accepts us, includes us, and gives us power to witness. As the gospel reading begins, Jesus finds himself alone at Jacob's well in the Samaritan city of Sychar. Having traveled all morning, he sits to rest while the disciples go into town to purchase food. Jesus is hot and he is thirsty. He has the same human needs you and I have. And at this point, he needs a drink of water.

About this time, a Samaritan woman comes – as she does everyday – with her bucket in hand to draw water from the well. Because she has a bucket and Jesus doesn't, he asks her for a drink. Seems harmless enough, but what isn't so obvious is that by asking her for water, Jesus is going against the grain of first century culture. First of all, the Samaritans and Jews were arch enemies because the Jews saw the Samaritan religion as a distortion of Judaism. The two groups didn't associate if at all possible. In fact, a Jewish traveler would often go miles out of his way to avoid going through Samaritan territory. The two groups were truly rivals.

Secondly, Jesus risks defiling himself. Samaritan women were thought to be unclean – as if in a constant state of menstruation. So according to Jewish social custom, by using the same utensils as she, Jesus would make himself unclean.

Thirdly, Jewish rabbis simply didn't talk to women without someone else present. It was totally inappropriate.

And finally, this woman comes to the well *alone*, and *in the heat of the day*, which itself sends up a red flag. Most women performed this daily task in groups because it provided them a time to socialize with the other women. And they generally attended to this chore earlier in the day when it was much cooler. This suggests that she is an outcast even among her own people.

So, we have four reasons for Jesus to avoid her. But Jesus sees that she, too, is thirsty – not for the cool water from Jacob's well, but for joy and meaning in her life. He can tell by the way she carries herself, from the lack of expression on her face, and from the sadness in her eyes that she is a very troubled and lonely woman. Jesus longs to touch her with his love, heal her hurt and pain, and fill the emptiness of her soul. So he ignores all the social customs of his day and puts his reputation on the line to reach out and care for her.

But Jesus' boldness surprises her and she quickly reminds him that they live in two entirely different worlds. *How is it that you, a Jew as a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?* Jesus responds tenderly. *If you knew who was asking you for water, you would ask for water from him, and he would give you living water.*

Where will you get this living water? she asks. *You have no bucket and the well is very deep. Are you greater than our ancestor, Jacob?* Jesus responds: *If you drink the water I give, you will never be thirsty again.* Jesus is telling her: *Woman, there is more. There is more to life than your day-in, day-out trips to this well for water. There is more to life than the mundane living of it. There is more to life than the mess your life is in. There is more that God has to offer, and he offers it to you as surely as you can offer me a drink of water.*

This makes her curious, but she still fails to catch the significance of what Jesus says. Like Nicodemus in last week's reading, she takes his words literally and misunderstands. *Sir, give me this water. Then I won't get thirsty and have to come draw water every day.* She doesn't understand that Jesus is offering her something more than what she asks for. He offers her *living water*. He knows that the water in the well will never meet this woman's need for meaning, no matter how many times she comes to fill her bucket.

But at this point, Jesus redirects the conversation – his chance to touch and heal her hurt. *Go call your husband and come back.* With just a few words, Jesus summarizes her unhappy marital history. She has had five husbands and the one she has now is not her husband. Now most of us who read this text automatically assume that she is a woman guilty of adultery. Perhaps that says something about us. But the text doesn't tell us that she is adulterous. Maybe her first five husbands died. She would have gone through five funerals. The pain and suffering in her life may have been too great that she couldn't commit herself in marriage to another man.

That's only one possibility. She could have been in marriages where her husband was abusive or simply grew tired of her and divorced her. Either scenario would have sapped the life out of her. Maybe that's why she went to the well at midday – because her pain was too great to talk about and she preferred to be alone.

Jesus gives us no clue as to her *moral* status; only her *marital* status. There is no condemnation in his voice. What Jesus *is* doing is showing her that she is worthy of God's love and drawing a circle of love around her, including her in that circle because God's grace makes her worthy.

You're a prophet, she replies, testing him. But because he knows about her personal life, could he be the Messiah? So she begins moving the conversation in that direction. *I know that the Messiah is coming, and when he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.* Jesus simply answers, *I am he.*

Now Jesus revealing his identity as the Messiah may not seem like a big deal. But this is the *first* time he does so in John's gospel, and he reveals himself to an outcast Samaritan woman – someone whom according to custom – he should have completely overlooked and ignored. This should provide a valuable lesson for us. Many are the times you and I pass judgment on, look down on, completely ignore, and disregard as having value those who are not like us. It may be because of their race, their economic status, their social status, or a host of other reasons we find to put up walls. But Jesus doesn't put up such walls. Rather, he works to break them down. He demonstrates that his circle of love is greater and wider than the social boundaries we put around ourselves. He draws his circle of love around this woman, showing her that she is accepted and included. Should we not follow our Lord's example?

When the disciples return, the woman leaves her bucket and goes back into the city. Leaving her bucket is significant. No longer is this woman performing a chore. She is now on a mission. And everyone she sees, she begins to tell about this man who has told her everything about her life. A woman who is considered an outcast, a woman who comes to the well alone in the heat of the day, a woman who probably avoids eye contact with those she passes on the street, is now a disciple for Jesus, urging others to *Come and see*. Having been included in God's saving love through Christ, she now understands that the water she draws from the well will only sustain her day-to-day, but the water Christ offers gives life forever and makes her day-to-day life worth living.

This woman was caught in a life of problems. Jesus knew it and offered her a way out. Not that her problems will now be over, but in following him she will have help in facing them. Jesus gave her hope that day. He gave her life back. He included her in his circle of love and she was off and running. No longer is life a chore. It is now a mission – a mission to share this good news with others.

Yes, we're excited about being affiliated with an athletic team or being included in some civic group, and we're quick to let our association be known. But do we do the same for our faith? For our church? Do we view opportunities to witness as a chore or is it our mission? In this story, Jesus shows us that we, too, are included in his great circle of love. In the waters of our baptism, we received the life-giving water that will sustain us throughout our lives. So let's drop our

buckets and tell the world that we are Christians. And let us show and tell others that they, too, are included in God's circle of love. Amen.