

“First Impressions”

John 4:5-42

March 15, 2020

We are a relational people. When events threaten to disconnect us, we find a way to plug back in. Oftentimes, it is our assumptions and incorrect conclusions that separate us from the opportunity for understanding and compassionate living. Hear what the Spirit is saying to us in these days. From John’s Gospel, the 4th chapter, beginning with the 5th verse:

To get to Galilee, Jesus had to pass through Samaria. He came into Sicker, a Samaritan village that bordered the field Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was still there. Jesus, worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon.

A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, “Would you give me a drink of water?” (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.)

The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, “How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (Jews in those days wouldn’t be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

Jesus answered, “If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking *me* for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water.”

The woman said, “Sir, you don’t even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this ‘living water’? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?”

Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

The woman said, “Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!”

He said, “Go call your husband and then come back.”

“I have no husband,” she said.

“That’s nicely put: ‘I have no husband.’ You’ve had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now isn’t even your husband. You spoke the truth there, sure enough.”

“Oh, so you’re a prophet! Well, tell me this: Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?”

“Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither here at this mountain nor there in Jerusalem. You worship guessing in the dark; we Jews worship in the clear light of day. God’s way of salvation is made available through the Jews. But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter.

“It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

The woman said, “I don’t know about that. I do know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we’ll get the whole story.”

“I am he,” said Jesus. “You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further.”

Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked. They couldn’t believe he was talking with that kind of a woman. No one said what they were all thinking, but their faces showed it.

The woman took the hint and left. In her confusion she left her water pot. Back in the village she told the people, “Come see a man who knew all about the things I did, who knows me inside and out. Do you think this could be the Messiah?” And they went out to see for themselves.

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

In this Bible story Jesus travels on purpose--and at some personal risk--into Samaria, a territory separated from the Jews by distance, tradition, and ethnicity. After the Assyrian conquest of Jerusalem in 721 BCE, the tribes that

are settled in the northern portion of Canaan are deported and dispersed. By the first century, these Samaritan tribes worship God on Mount Gerizim, some miles away from the Temple in Jerusalem, the dedicated Jewish worship site.

The division between the races is deep-- based not only in the style and place of worship, but in blood and identity. In short, the Jews and Samaritans hate each other. That Jesus travels to Samaria without a water container and locates himself at the town drinking well means only one thing: he is waiting for someone there to claim from him their blessing. He dares the Samaritan woman to stand up to him and defy this deep social barrier.

It's even more remarkable that a *woman* in the story is able to be such a strong character. But the encounter is set up for *just* this result, for Jesus sits expectantly at the well and the task of drawing water from the common well is women's work. Men of stature usually do not speak to a woman in public, and Jews do not, as a habit, interact with Samaritans. Jesus *intends* an encounter with the Samaritan *woman*, thereby underscoring his challenge to both the religious *and* cultural divisions of the day.

The woman's individuality is inconsequential —she is not even named in the story. Samaritans, as a people, are openly despised by Jews— they are called pariahs -- unclean, unsophisticated outcasts. A marginalized woman—a *Samaritan woman*- dares to stand up to Jesus, a Jewish man. This story forces elite Jews and new Christians alike to examine their own prejudices and traditional order of things against the backdrop of Jesus' teachings. What does it say to us, the 21st Century Christians?

At first, the woman assumes the man is thirsty and he is waiting for her to serve him. She also assumes the man is Jewish, and therefore, she is NOT supposed to serve him. But she doesn't rest on her assumptions. Instead, she asks a risky question: "Why does a Jew ask a Samaritan for a drink of

water?” In striking up this forbidden conversation, in standing up and talking back to Jesus, the woman asks for and gets what she needs. She gets confirmation that Jesus is, indeed, the promised Messiah.

We all make assumptions. We misperceive what we are seeing, misunderstand what we are hearing, and misjudge what we are feeling. We are hard-wired to be only marginally connected to any story not our own. When our beloved doesn't want to talk about something that is compelling to us, we assume he or she isn't interested in us or in what we have to say. When our boss rages against staff members at work, we assume someone is to blame and we just hope it isn't us.

And when a string of bad things happens in our lives, it is natural to conclude that we have done something to cause our misfortune or *God* has done something to us. It doesn't initially occur to us that our beloved may have something going on in life at that moment which makes it hard to direct attention to our needs. We take it personally and create all kinds of fantasies and dramas about what *must* be going on. “You must not love me anymore.”

It may not cross our minds that something may have happened to our boss that has spilled over into the workplace. Instead we often go to that place of resentment and suspicion where gossip and rumor run rampant. “Did you hear Mr. Sanders yelling at the staff this morning? I 'll bet he is hungover-he has a drinking problem you know.”

When we assume there must be unfolding against us a grand master plot of God or the universe, like in the case of this world-threatening virus, we get so wrapped up in the listing of things going wrong in our lives that we completely miss the blessings we have, too—the people who love and care about us, the physical comforts we enjoy, a church that opens its doors to us no matter where we are in our story. Most of all, we miss the simple gift of life

and opportunity, hope and experience that unfolds before us as soon as we open our eyes to greet the new dawn each day.

This virus has us all on edge. I am traveling this next week, and to be honest, I am a little bit anxious about it. Travel plans, sporting events—American *icons* like March Madness-- concerts, worship services-it seems *everything* is being canceled. We, at UCC Parker Hilltop, acted out of an abundance of caution to close the church this past week. Believe me, it was not an easy decision for Council and me to make. We love being together on Sundays; for some of us, it's a real and critical lifeline in an otherwise isolated life. But we had to put safety first. We couldn't *assume anything*.

We hope and pray this scare passes quickly—afterall, we are Americans! We can handle anything, can't we! But we have found out the hard way that we are under-funded, under-prepared, under-staffed, and soon to be underwater with the number of cases of very sick people—our people. We cannot blow this news off as we often do when it only concerns other folks- Chinese people or Koreans, Italians, or Iraqis.

It makes me think about the story of Moses and the plagues of Egypt. The Hebrews were told to put lamb's blood on their outer doors so the angel of death would pass by and not take their first-born children. We would probably do this today if it would help make the virus pass us on by.

We are worried for our parents. We are wary for ourselves. It is a stark reality of the preciousness and fragility of life when you are 60+ years old or have another particular vulnerability to coronavirus. Our first impressions of the risk for infection have proven wrong. If Tom and Rita Hanks can get this thing, *anyone* can. They are white, rich, famous Americans, and *really nice people*. Not like the woman at the well with her five prior husbands and live-in boyfriend. Not like “those people” in Europe and Asia who already caught the

virus. Now we have to pay attention. It has come here, and we are all vulnerable.

A few years back there appeared before me in court a young man in a wheelchair. He was about 20 years old. He had many tattoos, some of them encroaching his neck and face areas. He was dressed in a T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes. Except for his being confined to a wheelchair, he looked like every punk I saw daily in my court. He didn't make a very good first impression. He was the Samaritan woman to my Jesus.

A young woman walked into the courtroom, holding a baby girl perhaps 6 months old. People who think they are going to jail bring their small children to court so the judge will be less likely to sentence them to confinement. I made an assumption about her, too. Her bringing her child to court was irritating to me.

So, this day, I was sizing up this guy in the wheelchair and wondering if he was disabled for real, or just play-acting for effect. And I was sizing up this woman with her child and wondering what was up with her.

Afterall, these people were not MY people. They were of a different race; they were of a different social and educational class. And they were in court, so they *likely* had done something wrong. We were as divided by class and culture and power as we could be. And I was all wrong about them.

The man in the wheelchair greeted the woman, and she warmly smiled back at him. He asked if he could hold the child in his lap, and she agreed, tenderly handing her child over to him. His face lit up like a Christmas tree. He held the child gently and cooed at her. She looked up at him with big brown eyes.

I looked at the file to see what the case was about. It was a sentencing of a white male, age 40, who had committed a hit-and run assault with his

car. The police report indicated that he had run down a person in the crosswalk, barely missing a woman pushing a stroller with her baby inside.

A police officer came into the courtroom, and immediately went over to the man in the wheelchair. The officer put his hand on the shoulder of the man, who started weeping, his breathing wracked by sobs. The action unfolding got my attention; it didn't fit my preconceived assumptions. The officer knelt down and spoke in low, comforting tones to the young man, allowing the disabled man to be like a child himself. The story pieces were coming together.

The Marshalls brought a defendant into the courtroom in his county jail jumpsuit and shackles, and the two men exchanged looks. And then the man in the wheelchair threw a sign at the defendant with his right hand. He threw a sign all right, but it was not a gang sign. It was a peace sign.

This everyday hero was overjoyed to see the mother and baby that he had saved. While most of us would assume that what he needed were his legs back, we would be wrong. In his victim statement at sentencing, he said he felt blessed! What he needed from God was the opportunity to make peace with the person who had maimed him. What he prayed for was that mother and child were not injured. He felt *blessed* to extend the hand of forgiveness to his assailant. He felt *blessed* to hold and kiss the baby for whom he had sacrificed his own safety. What the young man needed from God was a day in a courtroom where a police officer and a mother thanked him for his selfless act.

When we find the courage to challenge society's assumptions, tabling our first impressions of others and asking God for clarity, then the window opens on the opportunity to be transformed. If we free our mind, heart, and soul from needing things to remain as they have always been, only then can

we be changed by the Spirit of God, changed in ways we could never foretell or even imagine.

The Samaritan woman had no idea as she opened her eyes one morning that an opportunity would present itself that would forever change her. She was able to embrace the gift of transformation because she talked back to the Messiah, challenging his time-worn assumptions. She asked for what she needed: to be truly and authentically seen and claimed by the Messiah.

As we together struggle in the coming days against this virus, pray that we can let our assumptions go about what we think life owes us, pray that we can release our elitism and tendency to blame others for coronavirus and its aftermath, and pray for patience, world community, understanding, and effort.

Perhaps this is your day to drink thirstily in the “reservoir of living water.” Perhaps this is also your day to see the blessing in your life’s challenges. I invite you as you go forth this morning to actively look for an encounter with the Messiah, for he has come to the drinking well and his waiting there for you.

May It Be So.

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