

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, March 19, 2017)

Text: John 4:5-42 (*The Message*) *This scripture was enacted by a group of players for this Sunday's service. Below is the original text taken from The Message.*

To get there, he had to pass through Samaria. He came into Sychar, 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.

It's Harvest Time

In the meantime, the disciples pressed him, "Rabbi, eat. Aren't you going to eat?"

He told them, "I have food to eat you know nothing about."

The disciples were puzzled. "Who could have brought him food?"

Jesus said, "The food that keeps me going is that I do the will of the One who sent me, finishing the work he started. As you look around right now, wouldn't you say that in about four months it will be time to harvest? Well, I'm telling you to open your eyes and take a good look at what's right in front of you. These Samaritan fields are ripe. It's harvest time!

"The Harvester isn't waiting. He's taking his pay, gathering in this grain that's ripe for eternal life. Now the Sower is arm in arm with the Harvester, triumphant. That's the truth of the saying, 'This one sows, that one harvests.' I sent you to harvest a field you never worked. Without lifting a finger, you have walked in on a field worked long and hard by others."

Many of the Samaritans from that village committed themselves to him because of the woman's witness: "He knew all about the things I did. He knows me inside and

out!" They asked him to stay on, so Jesus stayed two days. A lot more people entrusted their lives to him when they heard what he had to say. They said to the woman, "We're no longer taking this on your say-so. We've heard it for ourselves and know it for sure. He's the Savior of the world!"

Reflections by Pastor Donald: "I Hear You"

There is so much going on in the story we have before us from the Gospel of John today. I thought it would be easier to hear and definitely bring more life to what's happening to have our liturgist and players bring it to life for you today, and indeed they did. Thank you, Elsie, Bret and Gina!

So many of Jesus' encounters with people as recorded in the scriptures are so brief, that it's important to really hear what's going on in this account which is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone we meet throughout the gospels. That he should have this longest conversation with a woman, and a Samaritan one at that, is particularly significant since it says so much to us about who Jesus is and how he exemplifies the openness and inclusiveness we are to show to everyone not just those who reside in our own tribe. As The Message and our narrator put it quite succinctly, "Jews in those days wouldn't be caught dead talking to Samaritans."

Yet here is Jesus, caring not about gender, class or ethnic differences, but sitting down, by a well no less, and starting a conversation that will not only reflect who he is to any who encounter it, but change the person with whom he is conversing forever.

How appropriate that such a conversation take place at a well. For here not only will physical thirst be quenched but spiritual thirst as well. Entering into conversation with a stranger, Jesus shows us what it is to draw deeply from the well of love that God has for each of us; teaching us how to be present with another person so that whomever we are with feels truly heard and truly known.

Have you had an encounter like that in your own life? I'm one of those people that either has such an open face or, what I hope is a generous enough disposition that strangers will turn to me in line or on the street or in a café and just start up a conversation. Although not all of us are very comfortable in engaging in conversation with strangers, you might be surprised at how much you can learn about another person in a very short time. Most of us I think are just wanting to be seen, to be heard and to be known in some way.

Life in this 21st Century can feel so disconnected. I know I sound old, but it is dismaying to me to see a group of people in a restaurant or sitting together in a park or elsewhere and each person, even though sitting right next to another, is lost in the solitary life of his or her own phone. Now maybe they're texting each other, I don't know, but I do know that something is lost and off kilter when we can't even make conversation with the people huddled around us in what would appear to be a congenial group.

But don't worry, this isn't going to be a diatribe on twits who tweet, far from it. I'm just concerned that when we put so much emphasis on our impersonal connections with one another we lose the joy, the insight and the depth of understanding we get from our personal connections with one another that enrich our lives and make us feel truly heard, seen and known.

I have to wonder if we'd be in the crises we are in today in terms of immigration and the great fear some have in letting people into our country if we weren't in such a crisis of communication and connection. As a gay man, I know that one of the only ways people I grew up with could understand what it means to be gay was for me to tell them and for them to be open to being in my presence to hear it. Only by my willing to be in conversation with them and them with me could hearts be changed and could I feel truly known and understood. It doesn't mean that everyone agrees with me

or thinks I'm living rightly (whatever that means), but it does mean that fear has been reduced on both sides and none of us can ever think the same way about each other again after we encountered each other in conversation and had the willingness to truly listen and be known to one another.

I urge you to take the opportunity to listen to another's story. Find out what's going on not only in each other's lives but in the lives of those you meet in the course of a day. You'd be surprised at how much is happening in each life and what extraordinary connections can be made between those who would appear to be so "different" from each other.

Looking at the story before us today, Dr. David Lose notes that "Jesus doesn't just talk to [this Samaritan woman], he sees her. Jesus' words describing her marital history and present circumstances are not condemnation for past or present sins, but rather recognition that she has lived a tragic and difficult life. (Note," he writes, "that neither John as narrator nor Jesus as central character mentions sin or invites repentance.) Abandoned five times, now dependent on someone who will not marry her, she is in desperate straits. Yet rather than ignore, critique, or pity her, Jesus recognizes and names her challenges and so sees and values her. In doing so, he conveys to her that she exists for him. She is not invisible. She has worth and value."

That's what we can convey when we are willing to step into conversation with another. Seeing the "other" as a person of worth and intrinsic value we bring out the God not only in them but in ourselves as well. That's one of the meanings of Namaste, you know, "the God in me sees the God in you" and when that happens, we are both taken into the realm of being truly seen and truly known and we form a connection that connects with others around the world, strengthening not only us as individuals but our whole world as well – a world of people so desperate for connection and understanding.

"That's the kind of people God is looking out for," writes our UCC theologian Kathryn Matthews in her article, "Finding Refreshment" this week. "Those who are simply and honestly themselves before God...our true selves. Not the simple, one dimensional story that someone else uses to describe us...that flattens our experience because it makes things easier for them that way. Not the stereotype that sits so uncomfortably on our hearts and minds that sometimes we can hardly breathe. No, we come before God, who knows our every thought and our every hope, our every gift and our every broken place, every single beautiful thing about us, every wonderful story and even the ones that aren't so wonderful, we come before God, and God offers us a cool drink of water, and a place to rest, and listens to those stories, once again... Without real conversation, we lack intimacy and understanding; connection and empathy. Without real conversation, we risk detachment and distance."

Listen to each other's stories. Take the risk to enter into conversation with someone you don't know or perhaps know only a bit. You'll be surprised at how much you'll learn and at how much your own story may break forth from your lips. For as the great Maya Angelou wrote in her beautiful book, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."

I'd like to leave you today with a short essay by a man by the name of Joel Engardio from the book "This I Believe 2," called "Learning True Tolerance." Joel's story struck me as particularly profound since his story is one I believe many of us may have run from at first. But listen to how much there is to learn and understand when we sit for a moment and listen to someone else's experience who asks to be truly known.

(Note: Due to copyright protection, this essay cannot be reprinted here. However, the book can be borrowed from Pastor Donald's library should you wish to see it.)