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Church

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Do Good Fences Really Make Good Neighbors?

John 4:1–26

Mark Mitchell

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series: Come and See

John's Gospel has been called by some the intimate Gospel because it gives a very intimate portrayal of Jesus and some of the conversations he had. Today we come to one of the most intimate of all his conversations, and that was with a woman he met at a well in a place called Samaria.

This is the second intimate conversation we've looked at in this Gospel. The first one took place in chapter three with a man named Nicodemus. Though these were both one-on-one conversations, the contrast between Nicodemus and this woman couldn't have been greater. He was well educated, powerful and respected. She was uneducated, without influence and despised. He was a man, a Jew and a well-connected insider. She was a woman, a Samaritan and an outcast. Yet, as we'll see, they both needed the same thing—Jesus.

And that's what this woman at the well ends up with. As we'll see, when this conversation begins, Jesus and the woman are complete strangers, but when it ends she can say, "*...this man really is the Savior of the world*" (v. 42). The question is, how did she get there? How did one single conversation bring her to that conviction?

One thing this story reveals is it wasn't easy. There were more than enough barriers between Jesus and this woman to keep them forever separated. Have you ever sat in a room with someone, tried to have a conversation with them, and besides having very little in common, it seemed everything you said backfired? It's like there's this invisible wall separating the two of you. Years ago, Robert Frost wrote a poem called *Mending Wall* with a famous line: "Good fences make good neighbors." The idea is it's easier to be friendly with your neighbor if you just stay on your side of the fence. Good fences make good neighbors. Certainly you don't want to tear those fences down. You might trespass on your neighbor's property or privacy.

I guess Jesus didn't read that poem because in this story he tears down not just one but several fences that separated him from this woman. It might even be good to ask ourselves, what are the fences that separate us not only from one another but from him?

Jesus Offers Living Water Regardless of Gender or Race

The story begins with John telling us in v. 3 that Jesus and his disciples left Judea and headed back to the area called Galilee. You can see from the map that the shortest route from Judea to

Galilee would take you right through Samaria, and that's exactly what Jesus and his disciples did.

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon (John 4:4–6).

So they come to a town called Sychar, which no longer exists, but we do know where Jacob's well was, because it's still there. It's very close to the ancient town of Shechem and right at the foot of Mt. Gerazim. By the way, this well was fed by an underground spring that's reliable even to this day. Jesus comes to this well at noon and so it was very hot. They'd probably been walking for a couple of days, and so Jesus was exhausted. He sits because he was tired.

Isn't it interesting that our Lord, the One who spun the galaxies into motion at the beginning of time, got tired. He was human. We get tired. Sometimes we think it's wrong to be tired. If we really depended on God as we should, we'd have a constant source of energy and strength, but that's not always true. Jesus never strayed from his Father's will; he never stopped depending on him, but he got tired. Oswald Sanders once said, "The world is run by tired men." That may be true; it certainly was true here.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) (verses 7–8).

It was as he was sitting there by the well that a woman approached. It was unusual for this woman to be there all alone. Normally women came in groups to fetch water. It was a social time for them. And normally they wouldn't come in the middle of the day but either early or late to avoid the heat. So we wonder right away what kind of woman comes to a well all by herself in the middle of the day? Jesus is also alone because he'd sent his disciples into town to buy food. Normally, he might ask them to draw water for him but since they're absent he asks her. He's not only tired, he's thirsty.

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask

me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) (v. 9).

The woman responds to Jesus in verse 9. Here we see two of the barriers or fences that stood between Jesus and this woman. In this case, Jesus doesn't bring them up, she does. First, she's a Samaritan. John reminds us Jews don't associate with Samaritans. There was a long history of animosity between these groups. In 721 B.C. the Assyrians swept through the Northern kingdom of Israel and took the inhabitants off to Assyria. While they were there, the Jews that were left intermarried with the Assyrians. The race of people that resulted were known as the Samaritans. They even developed their own religion, which was a mixture of Judaism and paganism. They accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, but threw out the rest. They didn't go to the temple in Jerusalem to worship; they built their own temple at Mt. Gerazim. There developed a deep-seated rivalry and hatred between Jews and Samaritans. Jewish rabbis said, "Let no man eat the bread of the Samaritans, for he who eats their bread is as he who eats swine's flesh." A popular prayer in those days was, "Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection." In other words, send them to hell! That's why many Jews who were traveling from Judea to Galilee would avoid going through Samaria. They'd go east to Jericho and then travel north along the Jordan River. It was miles out of the way but worth the trouble.

So you can understand why this woman says, "*How can you ask me for a drink?*" But there was more to this. Not only was she a Samaritan, she was a woman. Strict rabbis forbade other rabbis to even greet a woman in public. There were even Pharisees who were called "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because when they saw a woman in public, they'd cover their eyes and bump into walls as they walked around. The Mishnah said Samaritan women menstruated from the time of their birth so they were always considered unclean. Imagine this woman's shock when Jesus not only greeted her but asked her to draw water and give him a drink with her own cup; a cup that would have been considered unclean by any self-respecting Jew!

Good fences make good neighbors? Not for Jesus. For Jesus, good neighbors ignore fences; tear down fences; climb over fences; jump fences. Race doesn't matter. Gender doesn't matter. Jesus breaks all the rules and engages with this woman. Why would he do that? Because he's thirsty? He **was** thirsty, but he's driven by more than just his own need for water. He's driven not by his own thirst but **her** thirst; a different kind of thirst.

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (v. 10).

She'd asked him, "*How can YOU ask ME for a drink?*" Jesus says if she'd known who it was asking her for a drink she'd have been asking him for a far better drink, what he calls "living water." Back then, living water was fresh, running water from a spring that was highly sought after in a land so terribly arid. We know Jesus is talking metaphorically, which is why he calls it "the gift of God," but this woman is still thinking literally.

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" (verses 11–12).

She's puzzled by his words and says, "*You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep.*" Jacob's well was at least 60 feet down to the water. If you didn't have a long rope and a bucket you couldn't get the water out. If he's offering fresh water without digging a well, then he's greater than Jacob. Jacob was one of the patriarchs of the Jewish faith. The Samaritans looked to Jacob as their founder as well. That's why she calls him "*our father Jacob.*" Most Jews would have argued with her on that point ("He's not your father, he's our father!"), but Jesus ignores it and presses on.

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (verses 13–14).

Now Jesus is being clearer. He's not talking about physical thirst; he's talking about spiritual thirst. There's within each one of us a thirst for something more. The writer of Ecclesiastes said, "*He set eternity in the human heart...*" (Ecc. 3:1). There's a built-in longing in all of us for meaning, significance, something bigger than this world can offer. We try to quench our thirsty hearts with companionship and intimacy, but human relationships disappoint. We try to slake our thirst with achievements or material possessions but we find ourselves needing increasingly more recognition or stuff just to stay satisfied.

For many of us, this longing manifests itself in the "when" syndrome. As a child, we think things will be different **when** we get to be a teenager. As a teenager, we think satisfaction will come **when** we can get out of the house. In college, we think it will happen **when** we get married. We get married and think satisfaction will come **when** we have children. We have children and we think, "Oh man, I can't wait for the empty nest!" We get an empty nest and we think, "I need some grandchildren!" You get it. It goes on and on.

Just as he's not talking about physical thirst, so he's not talking about physical water. He's talking about spiritual water. He says

the water I'm offering you will not only satisfy you, it will never run out. This water will be like a spring within you that wells up to eternal life. He didn't mean you could take one drink of this living water and never again feel a thirst of soul, any more than one could take one drink of physical water and never feel thirsty again. What he means is what we all experience in our own homes. How do we keep from thirsting? We have water piped in, available to us all the time, so that when we feel even a little thirsty we take a drink of it. That's what Jesus means here. The water he gives will be available constantly so that when you're thirsty you can go to the source and drink immediately and be satisfied.

This is nothing different from what God had promised his people for centuries. Let me give you a sampling from the prophet Isaiah, "*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation*" (12:3). "*For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants*" (44:3). "*Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters...that you may live*" (55:1-3).

This is what Jesus is offering this woman, and this is what he offers us. Regardless of whatever fences stand between us and him, he offers us life, eternal life that begins now, life that satisfies us at the deepest level of our soul. The source of this life, of course, is the Holy Spirit, whom God places within us. Later in John, Jesus cried out, "*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.*" Then John adds, "*By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive*" (John 7:37b-39a). This is an invitation to all of us, regardless of the fences we or our society have placed between us and God, to drink of living water.

Malcom Muggeridge was a well-known English journalist who wrote in his later years, "I may pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets - that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Inland Revenue - that's success. Furnished with money and a little fame even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions - that's pleasure. It might happen that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time - that's fulfillment. Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they're nothing - less than nothing, a positive impediment - measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are."

It should come as no surprise that this woman wants this water. That's what she says in v. 15.

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

We're still not quite sure if she gets it, but she likes the idea of not having to come out to this well in the middle of the day. Yet before she can really experience this water a few more fences must be confronted.

Jesus' Access to Worship Regardless of Sin or Religion

In verse 16 Jesus says to her:

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

This seems like a strange thing to say, but it was essential for her to come to terms with something if she was going to experience the gift of God. As we'll see, this woman had been drinking from another well for a long, long time.

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true" (verses 17-18).

As we've already seen in this gospel, he knows us; he knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows this woman has been around the block. Her life was composed of one relationship after another and all the emotional upheaval that goes with that. I read a quote this week by singer/songwriter Alanis Morissette. She said of her own past, "I think of the past as a little sister. I love her—but she could benefit from a couple more showers." And so it was with this woman at the well. With each new relationship she hoped to quench her soul's thirst, but it never worked. No wonder she's now just living with a guy. Why make another commitment? As a result, she had a reputation. Her love life kept the village women chattering for years. No wonder she came out to the well all by herself in the middle of the day! One by one her friends disappeared.

Now this strange man comes along and brings it right out in the open. Why did he do this? Jesus put his finger on a tender spot in this woman's life not out of some kind of cruel need to humiliate her. Rather, this is the skilled surgeon's scalpel that's absolutely necessary for her to really live. I love what Earl Palmer says about this: "Now the Samaritan woman knows that the joyous living water has been offered to the real person behind the mask." Not only has she been found; she's been found out, but this only makes his offer more compelling.

Jesus is tearing down another fence. It's her sin, and not just her sin but all the shame and all the justifications that went with it. For us to enter into a relationship with Jesus, for us to receive

this gift of living water he's spoken about, we must allow him to bring our sin into the light. There's no use in trying to hide it; he knows. We have to face it and acknowledge it. We have to come to grips with all the wells we've dug in search of water that will satisfy. Years earlier, God said through the prophet Jeremiah, *"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water"* (Jer. 2:13). That describes this woman and it describes us and for us to drink living water from him we have to abandon our efforts to find it in other places.

But she's still not ready. So she throws up another barrier. Look at verses 19–20.

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

Many believe this was a clever way for her to change the subject. "Hey, let's not talk about sin, let's talk about a disputed point of theology between you Jewish people and us Samaritans." And it was a disputed point of theology. The Jews, according to the Old Testament Scriptures, said the Jerusalem temple was the place where true worship took place, while the Samaritans said it was on Mt. Gerazim. I'm sure she'd rather talk about that than about her own failed relationships, but there is a connection. As the reality of her own sin pressed down on her, I wonder if she thought to herself, "If I'm a sinner before God, I must bring an offering for sin to him, but where do I take it? If I listen to this man who seems to know everything about me, I'd begin a trek to Jerusalem, but that's against everything I believe."

Jesus patiently responds to her question and invites her into something profoundly wonderful, exciting and new.

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he" (verses 21–26).

Again, Jesus stands before a fence. It's the fence of religion. Could it be that religion can keep you away from knowing and

worshipping the living God? Absolutely! There are several things to notice about what he says.

First, notice he twice says *"A time is coming..."* That word "time" is the same word Jesus uses elsewhere in this gospel when he says, "My hour has not yet come." Whenever he uses that language he's talking about the time of crucifixion, resurrection and exaltation and all that means. So Jesus is saying, "Listen, something is about to happen and is now upon you that will change everything. My life will culminate in something that will radically change worship forever."

Second, notice one thing that will change is that the location of worship will no longer matter. This would have sent shock waves through any Jew because their entire lives revolved around Jerusalem being the right place to worship. It would have shocked this woman as well. We're reminded that Jesus has already cleansed the temple and referred to himself as the new temple (John 2:21). Could it be that he (Jesus) is now the right place to worship? So that means you can worship on a hospital bed. You can worship in a prison. You can worship in a bar. Oh, and you can worship in a building like this too!

Third, notice that all of this would result in cataclysmic change in worship. Worship will now be *"in spirit and truth."* What does it mean to worship in spirit? He's not talking about the Holy Spirit, but the human spirit; in the depth of our inner being. Real worship isn't about outward ritual; it's not about where you are; it's about something that takes place in the very core of our being. Spurgeon wrote, "God does not regard our voices, he hears our hearts, and if our hearts do not sing we have not sung at all." Sometimes we sing and pray and give, but fail to worship. God indicted his people in the Old Testament because while they honored him with their lips their hearts were far from him. That doesn't mean real worship doesn't manifest itself in outward acts, but it doesn't start there, and it doesn't depend on any of that. It starts in your heart.

It's not just spirit, it's also truth. What does it mean to worship in truth? It means we worship what is true about God. Notice Jesus acknowledges the Jewish faith was born out of a correct knowledge of God, which the Samaritans lacked. He says, *"You worship what you do not know...we worship what we know."* Whatever Jesus is saying about worship, he's not negating all the truth about himself entrusted to the Jewish people. He is the promised Messiah. God wants us to worship him in truth. When we worship, we don't put our minds on hold. We need to think rightly about God.

One of the things that jumps out at me here is that three times Jesus refers to God as "Father." That's huge because that's not how people viewed God in those days. To call him Father is to address him and think of him and relate to him in the most intimate way possible. He says, *"The Father seeks worshippers..."* What an

amazing idea. Each time I worship God in spirit and truth, I'm not the initiator. I'm a responder. It's like he's been seeking me out, he's been chasing me down, and now I've come home.

As many of you know, I was raised in the Catholic faith. As a boy I believed that if you really wanted to connect with God you had to do it in a church. Honestly, I wasn't a very religious kid. I rarely gave God a passing thought, but one day when I was in middle school I experienced a kind of crisis. I really felt I had nowhere to turn. I wasn't the kind of kid to share what I was going through with anyone, but I felt a desperate need to pray. I was at least 2-3 miles from my church but I ran all the way there and I went into the church and I knelt down on the kneelers in front of the wooden pew, and I just poured my heart out to God.

What I understand now is that the Father really was seeking me to worship him at that point in my life. Just like this woman, the way he did that was by exposing my deep need, even my sin. I also believe that if I really understood these verses I could have saved myself a lot of sweat! I didn't have to run to the Catholic Church to pray. I didn't have to recite 20 "Our Fathers" and seven "Hail Mary's." A few years later when I really trusted Jesus as my Savior, it didn't happen in a church; it happened at my bedside. I wasn't in the right place; I didn't know the right words, but I

worshipped him in spirit and truth because my heart was broken and I came to him as my Father in heaven.

Good fences do not make good neighbors. Good neighbors ignore fences; tear down fences; climb over fences; jump fences. Race doesn't matter. Gender doesn't matter. Morality doesn't matter. Religion doesn't matter. Jesus is the best neighbor of all. Whatever it is that separates you from him, he can overcome it. He's pursuing you. He offers you living water that will quench your soul's thirst. He invites you to worship the Father in spirit and truth.

Many of you have already been found and found out by him. You are now called to be like him; to cross fences and pursue those around you who have yet to be found. Far too often we see people we run into throughout the day as just part of the landscape. They're there but we forget they're real people with real hopes and dreams and needs. Next week we will finish this story of the Samaritan woman and we will see that's what she did. She went back to that little village of Syhcar and told them all, "*Come and see this man who told me everything I ever did.*"

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail,
please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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