

Jesus on the Way to the Cross, I: True Worship

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John 4:1-30 NIV

The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. 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 the sixth hour.

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.) 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.)

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."

"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 flocks and herds?"

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

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."

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

"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."

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

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, 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 spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in 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 who speak to you am he."

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

You [Samaritans] worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:22-24).

A few weeks ago, on the last Sunday of Epiphany, we looked at the Gospel story of Jesus' transfiguration on the holy mountain — that mysterious event in which the disciples saw Jesus shining in brilliant light and heard a voice from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35). It was a turning point in Jesus' ministry, for it marked the beginning of his journey to Jerusalem, and to the cross. Hardly had Jesus and his disciples come down the mountain, when he told them, "The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men" (Luke 9:44). And a few verses later, Luke's Gospel tells us, Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51).

During our worship for the rest of this Lenten season, we're going to be looking at scenes from Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem, his pathway toward the passion. We'll be looking at Jesus on the way to the cross. To do this, we'll follow the Gospel of John.

There's a good reason for that. For in John's Gospel it becomes clear that Jesus is on his way to the cross from the very beginning. We see it already in chapter 1, in the cry of John the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" Actually, we've already begun this journey with Jesus through the pages of the Fourth Gospel. Several weeks ago we listened to that mysterious Bible character who came to tell us about Jesus at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where he told his mother, "My hour has not yet come." And then last week Brian read to us from chapter 3 of John's gospel, with those familiar words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Through the rest of Lent we'll continue our journey with Jesus on the road toward Calvary, where he is to be "lifted up" that he might draw all people to himself and reconcile us to God.

John, among the four Gospels, is especially concerned with the question of *truth*. What's real, what's reliable, what's genuine in our understanding of the ways of the Lord? That's John's big question. It's in John that we hear Jesus saying so many things about *truth*. "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). "Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth" (John 17:17). These statements are all from John's Gospel, and it's in John's Gospel alone that even Pontius Pilate asks, "What is truth?" (John 10:38). The question of what's real, and true, and genuine is an important theme in the story John is telling. As we look at Jesus on his way to the cross, then, our question is going to be, "What is Jesus teaching us about *the truth*?" We'll look at Jesus' words about reality and truth as he moves relentlessly toward the climax of the story — that "hour" when he is to be "lifted up" on the cross, and "lifted up" in his resurrection from the dead.

So next Sunday, as we observe the Lord's Supper, we'll turn to chapter 7, where Jesus speaks of *true authority*. The following week we'll turn to chapter 9, where he teaches us about *true insight*. Then we'll come to Palm Sunday, where we'll learn something from Jesus about *true sacrifice*.

Today, though, as we follow this sequence of Jesus on the way to the cross, we'll be hearing him speak about *true worship*. The story is a familiar one to all of us — the story of "the woman at the well," Jacob's well in Samaria. Now, this story is like all the incidents in John's Gospel — it's packed with meaning, in fact with *multiple layers* of meaning. John, perhaps to a greater degree than the other Gospel writers, never records things in just a superficial manner. The way he writes about Jesus always allows us to dig deeper and look at things from different angles — to ponder the symbolism that always fills these stories about the life of our Lord.

So let's look, first, at just the setting for this story of Jesus and the woman at the well. Jesus and his disciples are passing through Samaria, which is between Galilee and Judea. That, in itself, was a bit unusual. As John explains, "Jews do not associate with Samaritans," and typically the Jews would cross over east of the Jordan so they didn't have to go through Samaria. Why was that? Because the Jews thought of the Samaritans as second-class citizens, even as "half-breeds." They were the descendents of Israelites who had been left in Palestine when the Babylonians carried the Jewish leaders into captivity centuries before. The Babylonians had brought in other peoples from their empire to settle in Palestine, and the Samaritans had intermarried with them. As to religion, the Samaritans had only the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. The Jews didn't want the Samaritans coming to their Temple in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion, so they carried on their sacrificial rituals on another mountain, Mount Gerizim. By the way, a tiny group of Samaritans still exist, and I visited their "headquarters" at Nablus in 1968 and took a picture of the Samaritan high priest holding his Torah scroll.

So here is Jesus in Samaria, of all places, resting for a few moments at the well of Jacob the patriarch. His disciples have gone into the city of Samaria to buy something to eat. It's "the sixth hour," or around noon, when most people in that hot part of the world would be taking a kind of "siesta." When I was in Israel in 1968, all the shops closed during the middle of the day and reopened

again in the late afternoon. With the sun beating down at midday, most people would take cover, but here comes a woman from the city to draw water from the well.

Typically the women would come for their water early in the morning, in groups of two or three, but this woman comes alone at midday — as if to avoid the others. And shortly we learn why she comes alone: she's a kind of outcast because of her checkered personal history. As Jesus tells her, "The fact is, you've had five husbands, and the man you now have isn't your husband." But that doesn't come out till later in their conversation; Jesus begins by just asking her to put down her bucket and give him a drink from the well. And the rest of the story evolves from there, with several overlapping themes.

First, there's the theme of *water* — living water. Throughout the Bible, and here in John's Gospel, water is an important symbol of life, for no life can be sustained without it. Jesus asks for a drink of water from the well, and when the woman is surprised that a Jew would ask her for a drink, he tells 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." The woman doesn't understand that Jesus has shifted the conversation to a spiritual plane. She thinks he's still talking about water from Jacob's well. Jesus doesn't have anything to draw water with from this deep well; how could he give *her* any water? Is he greater than Jacob the forefather who made the well?

This kind of conversation is typical of what we read in John's Gospel. The people Jesus talks to are often just kind of dense. Nicodemus, Pilate, the high priest, even the disciples just "don't get it" when Jesus utters spiritual truths. They ask dumb questions, and in response to their questions Jesus goes on to explain what he really means. Is John making this up to create a better story? A little reflection will show that this is pretty realistic and down-to-earth. So often we just "don't get it" when Jesus speaks to us about the things of his Father.

So Jesus continues: "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst." And the woman makes the obvious dumb response: "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." Do we sometimes have the same attitude as the Samaritan woman? Jesus wants to give us the "living water," the life of the Spirit — the life that's transfigured by a vision of the glory of God, a radiant life that flows on a level above our crass and tawdry concerns and overcomes them through our oneness with the living Christ. Instead, we look upon the Christian faith as a quick solution to our problems. Lord, I'll believe you and serve you if you'll heal my sickness, if you'll get me out of debt, if you'll get my husband to pay more attention to me, if you'll make my kids do what I want them to do, if you'll get my boss to treat me better, if you'll change my world to conform to my needs and expectations. *Don't change me, just fix my problem. Give me this water, so I won't have to come to the well in the sun's heat and lug these heavy buckets back home, day after day!*

Second, there's the theme of the women's sinful life style. She had gone through a string of husbands and is living with yet another man. When Jesus confronts her with this truth, she's amazed. When she returns to the city, she tells her neighbors, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" Yes, she's impressed with Jesus because of what he knows about her — but there's no hint that she's ready to change her life style just because she's had a brush with God's Messiah. Can we put ourselves in this woman's place? Do we regard Christ as a kind of fortuneteller who can show us what's wrong with us, but then we don't follow up on what we've learned from him? Do we treat him as just another therapist from whom we can get a second or third opinion — without submitting to his authority, coming under his Lordship and making those changes we need to make in order to obey him?

But that's just the surface of our story. Going deeper, there's another theme: the theme of *true worship*. (You've probably been wondering when I would get around to that.) "You've had five husbands," says Jesus, "and the man you now have isn't your husband." I mentioned earlier that John uses a lot of symbolism in telling his story, and I think this woman is a symbol for all Samaritans — indeed, for all people who worship *falsely*. In Hebrew the word for "husband" is *ba'al* — which, as you know, is the term for false gods in the Old Testament. The prophets of Israel preached vigorously against the worship of these false gods, because the Israelites were always prone to desert the Lord, *Yahweh*, and worship the gods of the Canaanites. But the Samaritans, remember, didn't have the

writings of the Prophets, with their warning against false worship. All they had was a version of the five Books of Moses. That should have been enough to keep them from false worship, but indications are that the Samaritans were easy prey for the many cults that had spread across the Graeco-Roman world. “You’ve had *five husbands*,” Jesus says — could that be the five Books of Moses? — “but now you have another *ba’al* who isn’t your husband.” In confronting this woman with her marital history, Jesus is also, at another level, raising the issue of *true worship*.

Who are your “husbands,” your *ba’als*? What do you and I devote ourselves to, in place of the one God? What values have we *espoused* that take the place of Jesus, values that keep us from being “the bride of Christ?” The answer differs for each of us. Is it financial security? Personal comfort? Entertainment and recreation? The arts? Professional achievement? Hobbies and interests? (That could be *my* vulnerability, since I’m a railroad nut.) Even good things can be false “husbands”: family interests, religious activity, community involvement, personal improvement, love of country. These concerns can be a form of false worship if the living Christ, and the Word of God, aren’t found at their center, generating our vision and our priorities.

“The fact is, you’ve had five husbands, and the man you now have isn’t your husband.” Jesus has touched a nerve with this woman at the well, and immediately she tries to steer the conversation in another direction. “I see you’re a prophet! So let’s talk about religious customs. Our Samaritan ancestors taught us to worship on this mountain, Gerizim, but you Jews claim Jerusalem is the place where we’re supposed to worship. Who’s right?”

Sometimes, when people come to the pastor for counseling about personal problems, things begin to get too close for comfort. That’s usually the time when the counselee starts asking questions about *religion*. You take a pastor like me who’s interested in theology and worship, and I might get diverted and let you “off the hook” as I expound on this doctrine or that! But, when you get right down to it, questions about our life style and personal conduct *are* questions about *true worship*, because they have to do with the priorities of life — the values we hold supreme, those *ba’als* to which we bow down and around which we organize our lives.

So Jesus doesn’t dismiss the Samaritan woman’s question as a diversion. He takes it on. Gerizim, or Jerusalem? “Believe me, lady, the time is coming when you’ll worship the Father, and it won’t be on this mountain and it won’t be in Jerusalem either!” The presence of God isn’t localized at any historic site. Gerizim will fade out of the picture. (How many of you ever heard of it, anyway?) As for Jerusalem, that, too, will come to nothing. Within a generation after Jesus spoke to this woman, Jerusalem and its magnificent Temple had become a smoldering ruin, laid waste by Roman legions putting down a Jewish revolt. Jesus is looking ahead to what must happen if God’s people are to know *true worship* in the day when once-holy sites will be deserted and empty traditions will crumble to dust.

Is that our situation today? Do we see the church in trouble if things continue with “business as usual”? Do we see our faith attacked and challenged by ideologies that have no place for the Word of God? Do we see Christian traditions losing their power to shape our culture and the lives of people we love? Just a few days ago I received an email telling how Bill Maher of HBO is claiming that “religion is a neurological disorder,” “a crutch for weak-minded people.” He compares Christians to Islamic terrorists. “I think that religion stops people from thinking. I think it justifies crazies. I think that flying planes into a building was a faith-based initiative.” You all know how much I love the beauty and solemnity of the Christian worship tradition, especially when we gather for Holy Communion as we will do next Sunday. But unless our worship is *presence-driven* — unless it’s filled with a vision of the life of God in our midst — it’s headed the way of the butter churn, the Model T, and the twin towers of New York City.

So what does Jesus offer in place of Gerizim and 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 spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” Notice the contrast here, and the temptations. “You Samaritans worship what you do not know.” Unless we examine ourselves closely, we may not understand what we’re really worshipping. We may

think we're worshipping the Creator God, when in reality we're putting other gods before him, bowing down to the false values we've described earlier. Only an honest look at ourselves, and a serious look into the Scriptures, can show us how we're worshipping "what we do not know." But the alternative Jesus mentions might be equally tempting: "We Jews worship what we do know." That sounds good — but are we, as evangelical Christians, inclined to worship our own *knowledge*, instead of the God we think we know? In so many evangelical churches the emphasis is on *knowing* the faith, instead of *doing* the faith and *being* faithful. I have nothing against a solid knowledge of Christian doctrine, but it's more important to *know the Lord* — and to realize that the beauty, the love, the majesty, the holiness of the living God must transcend those doctrinal differences and human opinions that have divided church from church.

God is looking for somebody today. As the prophet Hanani puts it in 2 Chronicles 16:9, "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show his might in behalf of those whose heart is blameless toward him." Jesus says it another way: "A time is coming — it has already come — when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. They are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks." God seeks *worshipers* — people who will give him true and loving worship, the worship of the Spirit. And what does that mean? Sometimes we misunderstand what it means to be spiritual. We think it means to be *invisible*, but that's not what the Bible means by spiritual activity. In Scripture, nobody is ever said to be filled with the Spirit unless you can *see* something in their behavior that gives evidence of the working of God in their life. "Worship in spirit" is worship that others can *see* in us — consistent worship, active worship, joy-filled and enthusiastic worship, worship that makes a difference in how we handle our problems and relate to the people we deal with — because in worship we've *seen the Lord*.

And then, God seeks worshipers *in truth* — genuine, real worshipers. What is worship in truth? Jesus explains what truth is, in the Gospel of John. He says, "I am the way, the truth and the life." Praying to his Father, he says, "Thy Word is truth." True worship is worship that's filled with the life of Christ. Worship isn't about us, it's about Jesus. And true worship is worship that follows the worship pattern of Scripture — worship in which God's people gather to celebrate his covenant, bow down to him as their Sovereign, and listen to the proclamation of his Word. True worship is worship that brings us into the presence of God, to hear his voice and express our love for him.

Here at Union Congregational we're beginning to call ourselves a *worshipping* church, a *teaching* church, a *sharing* church, and a *caring* church. All these aspects of our church life are areas in which we're trying to obey the voice of our Lord. They all begin with, and flow from, that very first act that brings us together: our gathering for worship. Let our worship always be what Jesus says it *must* be, if God is to find us faithful — "worship in spirit and in truth."

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