

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Living Water is for Every Body
March 8, 2026
John 4:1-42

Jesus is taking a trip. He's heading from Judea to Galilee. For those of us who are accustomed to travel by car, this would be quite the walk. Depending on the route we choose, the journey will be somewhere between 70 and 90 miles. This makes for a long walk; it means several days of putting one foot in front of the other.

John tells us that Jesus had to go through Samaria. Well . . . that's not literally true; Jesus had other options. John wants us to know that Jesus did not select the shortest path because he wanted to get there as quickly as possible. Instead, Jesus opted for this direct route because he wanted to go through Samaria.

In the world Jesus lived in, boundaries were everywhere: religious boundaries, cultural boundaries, gender boundaries, and moral boundaries. Everyone knew where the lines were drawn.

For those of us trying to make sense of it all two thousand years later, some historical context will help. In the first century, Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. They had many reasons to dislike and even to distrust each other.

So, as a faithful Jew, Jesus would have been expected to avoid Samaritans, to keep his distance from those seen as religious outsiders. And even if he did travel that way, since it was the most direct route people would expect him to pass through quickly and avoid any real contact.

Jesus, however, won't be limited by the cultural expectations of his day. He often crosses boundaries. Sometimes he breaks them.

It isn't lost on me that this morning's Gospel reading went on and on. Its length is part of its beauty. Of all the people Jesus talked

with in Scripture, his longest recorded conversation is with the woman at the well.

This starts with a shocking scene. A Jewish leader talking to a Samaritan. A man speaking publicly with a woman who is not part of his family. The visual alone would be enough to draw the audience's attention.

Siblings in Christ, Jesus has sought out this encounter in order to teach us something that could change everything.

The encounter begins with thirst. Jesus sits down at Jacob's well, tired from the journey. When the woman arrives to draw water, he simply says, "Give me a drink."¹

Before Jesus says anything about theology, before he brings up worship, before he mentions living water, he begins with relationship. He speaks to her. He acknowledges her. He treats her as someone who is worthy of his time and attention.

And the woman can't help but notice. She asks, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"²

As a woman, she knows the rules. As a Samaritan, she knows the boundaries. And, she knows that Jesus has already crossed them.

Before I go any further, I feel compelled to share a disclaimer: this woman has often been misunderstood and misrepresented in sermons. I imagine nearly all of us have heard a message that focused on her questionable reputation as someone who had five husbands.

Context alone suggests that isn't the point here since she is not condemned anywhere in the passage for her many relationships. And cultural norms dictate that women couldn't initiate a divorce.

In preparing for this sermon, I came across insightful explanation written by my former seminary classmate Jennifer Garcia

¹ John 4:7, RSV

² John 4:9, RSV

Bashaw. Now a professor of New Testament, Dr. Garcia Bashaw writes:

So, if Jesus is not shaming the woman, why does he mention marriage? Many commentators interpret the woman's husbands symbolically, representative of either the five political powers that had ruled Samaria or the five groups that were rumored to have comprised the early Samaritan people. In this view, Jesus is rehearsing Samaritan history.³

Jesus, the master storyteller, wants us to know that we can hear this story on many levels. Whether you had ever considered this before or not, I hope you listened closely to her conversation with Jesus as it transitioned from water to living water before moving on to worship and the coming Messiah.

She asks thoughtful questions. She engages deeply. She senses something holy is unfolding.

And, she becomes the first person in John's Gospel to hear Jesus declare that he is the Messiah. Jesus chooses her, not a disciple, not a religious leader, and not a well-known political leader to make this known to. Of all of the people he encountered or could have chosen to encounter, he picks the Samaritan woman at a well.

Jesus makes it clear that living water isn't stashed away in a special well accessible only by the one-percenters. It isn't reserved for the best or the brightest.

God's living water is for every body. Let me say it again: God's living water is for every body.

This is every bit as radical as it sounds. All are welcome. Every culture. Every race. Every gender identity. Every sexual orientation. Every body.

³ Jennifer Garcia Bashaw. Commentary on John 4:5-42 in Working Preacher, March 12, 2023, available from www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-45-42-6

The woman at the well was there at noon because she knew this was a time she could go without being bothered by others. She knew how little the world she lived in valued her. And, yet . . . And yet she persisted. She persevered. She pressed on.

And then, amazingly, she becomes the very person through whom an entire community encounters Jesus.

After this conversation, she leaves her water jar behind. She leaves many of the old thirsts of her life at the well. And, she rushes back to town to tell all who will listen.

"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did."⁴

Her neighbors must have noticed a difference in her because they see her. They hear her. And, they respond to her.

They accept her invitation. They meet Jesus. And many believe.

The evangelist in this story is the one who most had previously ignored. More often than not, this is how God works.

The good news spreads like wildfire when ordinary people, who have been transformed by Jesus, boldly proclaim their stories.

And that brings us to the church. After all, we recognize this story is more than a tale of something Jesus did back then. It is a reminder of who Jesus invites us to be and become today.

The church is meant to be a community that lives as Jesus did at the well. Like Jesus, we should be a people who cross and sometimes even break boundaries rather than building new ones. Like Jesus, we should be a people who welcome conversation with the very people our culture advises we avoid. Like Jesus, we should be a people who readily share living water with those we encounter.

⁴ John 4:29, RSV

For historic congregations, including First Christian, this is especially important. Historic congregations know better than most the value of their traditions. They recognize the wisdom of those who came before. And, they trust that what has been will continue.

While traditions and historical rootedness are gifts, they must not stop us from continuing to ask hard questions. We must decide whether to walk through Samaria or to go around it. And, those who choose to walk through must decide whether they will rush by not really seeing anyone or if they will linger long enough to become uncomfortable and to begin building relationships.

As a former downtown resident and as someone who has spent time walking about downtown this week, I can assure you that these opportunities exist right outside our front doors.

In the days leading up to becoming your interim pastor, thanks to the modern miracle we call social media, I was able to look and see some of what happens here. One day, I saw Norma out on the front steps with Christy on one side and Andy on the other. They were taking church out into the streets. They were inviting passersby to receive ashes. They were welcoming all to the Lenten journey.

Ash Wednesday marked the beginning of Lent. Today marks the beginning of a season we call intentional interim time. While Lent always lasts 40 days, the duration of interim time is less predictable. Both, however, are times when we are asked to give more attention to matters of faith.

In a post-pandemic world, congregations are increasingly aware that the world has changed. While the church's message hasn't changed, its methods must adapt to remain relevant. Refusal to listen to new voices, to welcome new leaders, and to try new things often accelerates decline. Ongoing refusal can be a symptom of what many have called the seven last words of the church, "We never did it that way before."

As we begin the work of transition by entering the interim time, we know that God is still speaking. Together we trust the process of interim ministry, acknowledging it is a season of reflection and renewal. And, we open ourselves to the shared work of looking honestly at First Christian's past, becoming more familiar with our present, and discerning a shared vision for this congregation's future.

As we begin, we are guided by the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well.

I wonder . . .

- Are ready to cross or even break boundaries?
- Are we willing to start conversations with people who are unfamiliar to us – even folks we previously didn't have the eyes to truly see.

While you consider these possibilities hear this newsflash:

The well will never run dry.

There will always be plenty of living water for every body.

Amen.