

March 19 Lesson: Jesus Talks with a Samaritan

Spring Quarter 2023: Jesus Calls Us
Unit 1: Called from the Margins of Society

Sunday School Lesson for the week of March 19, 2023
By Hal Brady

Lesson Scriptures: John 4:7-15, 28-30, 39-41

Key Verse: John 4:39

Lesson Aims

1. Identify the barriers that Jesus ignored when talking with the Samaritan woman.
2. Explain the significance of Jesus' discussion with the woman in light of the prevailing cultural, political, and religious taboos he ignored.
3. Identify elements of Jesus approach to evangelism that he or she will use.

More often than not, it suggests distinctive smells and dress. It also suggests substandard housing, particular voice inflections and diverse color. The actual railroad may or may not be a factor. Usually, it signifies a state of mind. But always—always—it is reserved for places and people who are different. What am I talking about here? I am describing “the other side of the tracks.”

In today's text Jesus himself models breaking barriers in ministry. What will be the impact of reaching out to the wrong neighborhood—to the other side of the tracks?

Lesson Context

The Gospel of John was written later than those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, probably in the AD 80s or 90s. The Apostle John likely wrote his Gospel from Ephesus, according to long-held church tradition. John's authorship is established primarily by his identification as the beloved disciple (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20, 24).

As our text in John 4 begins, Jesus and his disciples had left Judea and were heading to Galilee (John 4:3), where he made the headquarters of his ministry (Matthew 4:13-16). For this journey, Jesus chose not to take one of two longer routes that would allow him to avoid Samaria (John 4:4), as some other Jews would do.

Thus, we are told that Jesus simply had to pass through Samaria. Some scholars say that this was more a “theological necessity” than a “geographical necessity,” pointing out the fact that “God so loved the world.” As I said, most Jews travel around Samaria (the other side of the tracks). But not Jesus! Samaria was the central region of what had been the kingdom of Israel, with Judea to the south and Galilee to the north. Travel between Jerusalem and the region of Galilee would take about three days on the reliable Roman roads that run through Samaria.

I. The Stranger **(John 4:7-15)**

At the sixth hour (noon), Jesus came to this well that was known to have belonged to Jacob (John 4:5-6). It was uncommon for anyone to be at the well at that hour, as the day was at its hottest. From ancient times, women journeyed to draw water as a group in the morning or evening (example: Genesis 24:11).

However, while Jesus is resting beside the well a woman comes from a nearby town in Samaria called Sychar, and she's carrying upon her head an empty jug. Look carefully at her. She's a Samaritan. She's hybrid. Her blood is both Jewish and Assyrian. Her ideas are a mix of Hebrew and heathen. She shares her people's prejudices against the Jews. Why is she along? Why is she coming to the well in the heat of the day rather than the cool of the evening or early morning? The other women gather at the well in the evening to catch up on the news and happenings of the day. It is a social event, but this woman doesn't share in it. Look at her again: added to her other woes, this woman is an outcast of society.

As soon as she approaches, however, Jesus immediately says to her, "Will you give me a drink?" That question does not seem an unusual request at a well. But John 4:9 reveals several levels on which this was a very surprising request.

Jesus and his disciples sometimes carried funds to buy what they needed along the way (example, John 13:29), though other times they depended on other means for their sustenance (example Matthew 10:9). This journey took them through Samaria, specifically the town of Sychar. Ancient Jewish tradition suggests that the disciples would have been careful about ritual purity and social boundaries when procuring "food" from Samaritans. Ordinarily they would not accept food as a gift from Samaritans but allowed for the need to buy from Samaritans.

Now, the reasons Jesus' request for water is surprising are given in verse 9. One is a gender issue. Women were often viewed as "less than" by men in the ancient Roman world. For a Jewish man, this would be especially true for any non-Jewish woman. And Samaritan women were doubly stigmatized because of the animosity between Judah and Samaria.

Within this conversation, "the Samaritan woman" would be amazed that Jesus knew about her several marriages and the man she was living with at the time (John 4:16-19). Both Jews and other Samaritans would consider this pattern suspicious, if not downright sinful. We do not know why she had been married so many times. But the implication of living with a man she had not married suggests there were less than pure reasons for the ending of the other relationships.

Still, another reason why Jesus' request is surprising is that Jews did not associate with Samaritans (John 4:9). Here, it's only mentioned a few reasons why.

The antagonism between Jews and Samaritans dated back over 700 years to the Assyrian Conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The ten tribes of Israel living there were taken captive in 722 BC, including the people living in the region called Samaria (2 Kings 17:1-6). The Assyrians habitually moved conquered people around the empire, so some Israelites remained while many foreign people settled in the land. When Israelites mingled well with foreign peoples, the result was a syncretistic religion in which the Lord was worshipped in addition to other gods (2 Kings 17:24-33, 41).

All this religious turmoil resulted in a Samaritan religion that revered only the books of Moses (the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch). Samaritans excluded any history, poetry, or prophecy that was written later. And the Samaritans believed that God should be worshiped on Mount Gerizim (see Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:12), not in Jerusalem. They also expected a Messiah like Moses, not David.

In addition, the Samaritans opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple and the city walls following the exiled Jews' three waves of return that began in 538 BC (Ezra 4:8-24; Nehemiah 4:1-2).

There were other atrocities that Samaritans and Jews committed against each other, much as the Jewish destruction of the temple on Mount Gerizim and the Samaritan attempt at defiling the temple in Jerusalem during Passover by sneaking in and scattering dead men's bones on the temple's grounds (compare Leviticus 21:1, 11, Numbers 5:2; 9:6-7, 9:13).

In reply, Jesus chose not to engage in an ethnic-oriented debate with the woman but rather turned the focus to "the gift of God" (4:10). While some commentators interpret this gift as the living water, it is more probable that the gift is Jesus Himself, the Messiah, given by God (John 3:16). The expression "gift" should be viewed as one of the many descriptive titles of Christ. And we are told by scholars that the word "kat" here translated "and," can also be translated "even," in which case Jesus would be identifying Himself as even the gift of God. Paul declared that Christ is the undeniable gift of God (2 Cor. 9:15).

As a resident of Shechem, in Samaria, the woman knows the location of every water source. But here, Jesus says something unexpected: he is able to provide "living water" (4:10b). "Living water" refers to water that flows in a spring, river, or stream, that is "moving" water. Other waters stood still, and it could be found in a well, cistern, or pond. Living water was precious and valued and according to rabbinic law was the only water that could be used in ritual washings to make unclean worshipers pure.

Now, everyone knew that Shechem had no rivers or streams. Even Jacob had to dig a well in order to water his flocks here (4:12). So how could a Jewish outsider, someone who barely knew the terrain, offer water that no one else had found? There was no living water in Shechem.

But the woman stumbles on the metaphor and misunderstands. However, she is curious about the possibility of a nearby stream or spring (4:11b). But Jesus wants her to look beyond to the spiritual significance of what this water means. This is water that eliminates thirst (4:13), a water that leads to eternal life (4:14). It is no surprise that in this arid country something so precious as running water would take on symbolic meaning. Simply stated, living water is life nourished by God.

For historical significance, I want to backtrack a minute to verses 11b-12. The well itself had long been associated with "father Jacob," who lived about 2000 years prior to the encounter of today's text. Jacob had bought the land of Shechem, eventually deeding it to his son Joseph (Genesis 33:18-19; Joshua 24:32). Although no well was mentioned. The Samaritans traced their lineage through Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

But because of the divergence of Israel's ten tribes from the southern two, collectively known as Judah, the Jews thought of Samaritans as a foreigner (Luke 17:16-18). This well can still be visited today, and I've had the privilege of visiting it.

One more thing here! Like Jews, the Samaritans had great respect for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and the woman thought that Jesus could not be greater. Based on her faith, we cannot fault the woman for asking this question.

Jesus said in verse 14, "...Instead the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." "Welling up" suggests especially vital properties in the living spiritual "water" Jesus referred to. Perhaps this is a formula at this point: "eternal life" comes only as a gift of the Father through accepting the invitation of Jesus and the daily work of the Spirit. As scholars suggest, "the gift" of God also refers to the Holy Spirit. Explanation is found in John 7:38 and 39, which is consistent with other New Testament usage and nuance.

"What do you want?" An exasperated waitress asked a couple of tired businessmen who sat down at the lunch counter at the airport. One of the men looked up and said, "Lady, I want a slice of life."

To this, the waitress slammed down the menu and responded, "Buddy, that's the one thing I ain't got to give."

"A slice of life" – the waitress didn't have it to give, but the Lord Jesus does. Not just a slice but the whole thing given through the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

In summary of verses 7-14, some scholars believe the writer or writers of John's Gospel understand "living water" as Jesus revelation and teaching. Others argue that the writer understands the living water as the Spirit commissioned by Jesus. But whichever it is or both, there is really no need to focus over it because in the thought of John's symbols generally there are several meanings. The point is that the "Living Water" is the "gift of generosity of God" as Eugene H. Peterson put it in "The Message."

In verse 15, the woman's request demonstrates her confusion about Jesus words. She is in search of literal, physical "water" to meet her immediate needs. But even with her misunderstanding, she admirably continues her inquiry and search for understanding.

The dialogue in John 4:16-27 (not in our printed text) continues between Jesus and the woman. She rapidly progresses from considering Jesus to be a prophet to wondering if he might be someone even greater than that.

II. The Promised One (John 4:28-30, 39-41)

"Leaving her water jar behind" indicates that "the woman" left in a hurry or she could have planned to bring her man back to meet Jesus. At any rate, the town she went to was Sychar, which is only mentioned by name in John 4:5. It is located in proximity to both Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. Though its location is unclear, there is reason to associate it with the modern village of Askar. Located about one half mile from Jacob's well, the name Sychar might also

indicate a close relationship with Shechem, a better-known settlement in the same area. First mentioned as Abraham entered Canaan (Genesis 12:6-7) the land became part of Ephraimite territory in northern Palestine (Joshua 7:8-10).

The woman's invitation to "come see" is reminiscent of Jesus' invitation when he called his first followers in John 1:39. Describing Jesus knowing about her marriages and current living situation as having "told" her everything that she "ever did" reveals something about the culture this woman was living in. Her life's summary (at least in her mind, and likely in the minds of her community as well) would be told in terms of the men she had associated with. However, instead of using this information to shame her, Jesus uses it to further her understanding regarding his identity. He was at least a prophet (4:19) and even more.

In confirming Jesus' accurate and supernatural knowledge of her life story, the woman's testimony reveals that she was fully impressed by him. Given the culture and her reputation, it would seem she would be a bad witness—not someone who could be taken seriously as she was.

Now the woman anticipates a positive response, partly based on Jesus' own assertion that he is the Messiah (4:25-26, not in our text). The Samaritan expectations of the Christ differed from Jewish expectations because of their adherence only to the first five books of the Old Testament. Jesus fulfilled prophetic and kingly expectations, though not in the way either Samaritans or Jews had imagined (examples 6:15, 41-42; 7:25-27, 52; Acts 1:6).

One sign of discipleship is the testimony given to others—words that eagerly spill out because of the preciousness of discovery. "Come see," as I mentioned earlier, is a Johannine phrase of invitation. Potential converts do not need more information about Jesus—note that the woman is even tentative about Jesus' identity as the Christ, they need only to come and have their own experiences with him. It has been said that the Christian life is based on the twin pillars of discovery and communication, and it is.

In Jesus' ministry, people living on the margins sometimes made the biggest influence on their communities (example: Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 19:1-10). This ostracized woman turned evangelist reaching out to her community, which resulted in "many of the Samaritans from that town" believing that Jesus was the Christ. Significantly, her testimony was that Jesus "told me everything I ever did"—a substantial claim when looking for a prophetic Christ.

The evangelization of a Samaritan town emphasized the power of a testimony. No doubt the woman was well known in the town, and the change in her life resulted in many people believing in Christ simply because of what she said. They invited Jesus to stay in their town, and He did so for two days, and many more believed. As the Samaritans encountered Jesus for themselves, they confess that Jesus really is "the Savior of the world" (14:42).

We cannot help but ponder how large the community of faith grew in Sychar. In Acts 8:4-25, the gospel spread in the land of Samaria through the work of Philip the evangelist, the ground-work for that success undoubtedly prepared by the events of today's text.

In summary, Jesus' earthly ministry did not include limits based on typical human barriers such as "on the other side of the tracks." His encounter with the Samaritan woman is a prime example.

In Jesus' presence, many of the boundaries that we have never put up or that others have put up around us disappear.

As we find our identity in Jesus, we can become the conduit of mercy and grace to those we encounter. The living water Jesus gives us is available now and will continue to "well up" in us until we reach the age to come.

So, how do we communicate the Gospel best? Here are three suggestions:

1. by lifting up Christ,
2. through incarnational witness,
3. and by serving with compassion and love through social action.

Action Plan

1. What hurdles does your congregation face when reaching out to a community that might be mistrustful of your motives?
2. Are any of your prayers "small" compared to what Jesus offers you?
3. How can you become more open to Spirit-led opportunities to share Christ?
4. What challenges do you find in the passage?

Resources For This Lesson

1. "2022-2023 NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, Uniform Series, International Sunday School Lessons," pages 249-256.
2. "The New Application Commentary (John)", by Gary M. Burge, pages 138-145, 148-150.
3. "The Gospel of John Believe and Lives" by Elmer Towns, pages 37-42.
4. "The Gospel of John Volume I, The Coming of the Light (John 1-4)" by James Montgomery Boice, pages 276-281.

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