

**“Following Jesus on the Way, Where He Goes, and in What He Offers”**

**John 4:1-42**

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Have you ever noticed how much of Jesus’ ministry takes place not as the result of careful planning but simply in the natural rhythm of life? Sometimes people come to him and sometimes he bumps into them on the way to somewhere else, but many of his most significant interactions occur more out of happenstance than by design. Jesus does not form a strategic planning committee or visioning group. He doesn’t use a calendar program to keep up with a long series of meetings. He has a clear sense of who he is and where his journey will ultimately end, but beyond that, most things happen in the natural flow of life.

Such is the case with the story we have read today from John 4. Jesus is travelling from Judea to Galilee and decides to stop around midday for a drink of water and a bit of rest at a well in a Samaritan city called Sychar. Scholars are not in complete agreement as to whether this is the ancient city of Shechem or some nearby town. John says it is near land given by Jacob to his son Joseph and the well is Jacob’s well. In any event, Jesus goes to the well because he is tired and thirsty. They have been walking in the heat for some time and it is midday.

It’s like stopping at McDonalds for a quick lunch after driving for several hours on the way to Disney World or the beach. But at this particular McDonald’s, Jesus bumps into a woman with whom he has a significant conversation. She walks up to the well for reasons similar to his, and he is willing to talk to her. In fact, he initiates the conversation by asking her to give him a drink. This is highly unusual for reasons we will explore in a few moments, but the first thing to note here is that everything that takes place from this point forward occurs because Jesus just happens to stop there for water and so does the woman.

Now, I should acknowledge that if we have a very intrusive view of providence wherein God controls every detail of life, and if we

believe that Jesus is mostly divine and only a little bit human, we could argue that God puts both of them there and Jesus knows the woman is coming. But even John, who has a high view of providence and strong belief in Jesus' divinity, does not make this argument. Jesus stops for a drink, the woman shows up, and the rest just happens.

Jesus offers the woman living water, she wants to know where to get it, he tells her about her complicated family situation, she wonders if he is the Messiah, and in the end, she not only seems to move in the direction of faith, she gives witness to who Jesus is for the whole community! All of this just happens in the natural flow of life.

The implication for us is that it is wise to pay attention to the opportunities for ministry that arise in the normal flow of life. This is not an excuse for laziness or reason to give up all planning. The best jazz improvisation is performed by trained musicians who practice tirelessly. But as someone has said – life is what happens while we are making plans. God is at work in many different ways, not all of which fit into our plans. And while much significant ministry requires careful planning – there is no way to operate a clothing ministry without acquiring clothing and recruiting volunteers – we all encounter people and situations every day in the natural flow of life that call for our compassion, insight, and witness to Christ.

But this means we not only have to make room for such ministry, we have to be alert to the opportunities that come our way. And for most of us, this means slowing down enough to pay attention. Most of us have schedules that are so over-planned that we rush from one activity to another without paying attention to anyone along the way. There was a story in the news this week about a man in Louisiana who was pulled over by the police because his license tag had expired. It expired in September, 1997! When asked why he had not renewed the license for this long, the man said he had been busy. For 23 years?

Surely there is more to this story, but often our busyness prevents us from doing practical things and it prevents us from noticing opportunities and from responding to them when we do notice them. The person we pass by might seem distressed, but we just don't have time today. And often we really don't... but what might we be missing?

I remember the Sunday afternoon several years ago when our dear friends from Pakistan walked into the church office. How they got in I don't know, but Penny Frisbie happened to be there with me, and that turned out to be very helpful. They had not been in the country long, they were looking for help, they just happened to walk by our church, they somehow got in when the door is usually locked, and we happened to be there. We had not planned on this meeting, we really didn't have time, but for some reason, we sat and talked with them for a very long time, learned about their needs, and they have been a part of our church ever since. What opportunities do we have every day in the natural rhythm of life to extend kindness to people around us?

But what's significant in today's story from John 4 is not just that Jesus is open to what may happen on the way to Galilee, but where he is willing to go in the first place and with whom he is willing to interact. As the story begins, Jesus is leaving Judea and heading back to Galilee and John says that "he *had* to go through Samaria." Why did he have to? It is in between Judea and Galilee, but there are routes Jesus and the disciples could take to avoid the center of this territory which is thought of as enemy or alien territory. So, it is not a geographical necessity that Jesus takes this path. It is a theological and philosophical necessity.

Jesus spends his life reaching out to people others avoid – tax collectors and prostitutes, lepers and demoniacs, Samaritans and Gentiles. Much of his ministry is among the marginalized, the outcast - even the enemy - because they are the people who need his love the most. He comes for the sick, he says, not the healthy. He comes to reconcile differences and build bridges, not walls. And the only way to do that is to be among the people who need him the most, be where they are, and then be willing to speak to them, listen to them, teach them, and ultimately embrace them in love.

So, he enters Samaritan territory, not knowing exactly whom he might meet but realizing that there are Samaritans living there, and when he encounters a woman at the well, he engages her in conversation. Everything he does violates the standards of his culture and religion. Men do not interact with unknown women. Jews do not interact with

Samaritans much less receive hospitality from them. And a rabbi does not speak with a woman of questionable moral standing – Jesus eventually names her awkward family realities, the fact that she has had almost as many husbands as Elizabeth Taylor, but we might assume she is hiding something because she comes to the well in the heat of the day, not when the other women come - in the morning when it is cooler.

But Jesus talks with this Samaritan woman – not only talks with her, but has with her the longest conversation he has with anyone in the Christian Testament! What is Jesus doing? He is being Jesus – going where other well-respected rabbis will not go; talking to a woman others would avoid; receiving hospitality and extending kindness, truth and ultimately salvation.

The implication for us is that we are wise not only to pay attention to the opportunities for ministry that arise in the normal flow of life but to be willing to go to the places where people who most need us will be and be willing to extend kindness to them. Who are the outcasts and marginalized of our time? Who do we consider to be our enemies or at least our adversaries? Immigrants, homeless people, Muslims, liberals, fundamentalists, LGBT people, homophobic and sexist people, persons of color, racists? We are all uncomfortable with someone and some groups. Do we avoid these folks and the places they are likely to be or do we intentionally put ourselves in a position to interact with them?

I have shared with some of you the story of what civil rights activist and itinerant preacher and philosopher Will Campbell did for a year of his life. He had been talking to people about reaching out to those we find most difficult to love and realized, somewhat to his own horror, that the people he struggled most to view as human and worthy of his concern were white supremacists, especially members of the Ku Klux Klan. So, he spent a year drinking bourbon with KKK members.

Now, anyone who knew Will knows that the bourbon part was not a challenge for him, but the Klan part was. Yet he felt as strongly about this venture as any he approached as a mission of God throughout his life. These KKK members were children of God too, no matter how much they had tarnished the image of God within them, and Will affirmed that reality simply by spending time with them. With whom

might we need to spend some time if we are to follow Will Campbell in this kind of authentic faith endeavor? Where might we have to go to interact with them? Are we willing?

But there is one other thing we ought to note that Jesus does in this story from John 4. He not only ministers to people in the natural flow of life and makes sure to include those who need him most; he offers them the same thing he offers everyone else – love and acceptance, grace and truth, himself and a way to salvation, healing, and wholeness.

Jesus doesn't change his message. He doesn't dumb things down for the Samaritan woman nor does he avoid important subjects because they might be touchy. He didn't get the memo about not talking about politics and religion. He talks about both, in addition to talking about the woman's family life for which she is judged but for which she is not responsible. She may have been married five times, and we don't know how those marriages ended, but we do know that each man either died or divorced her because she could not have divorced them.

So, while she may be an outcast even in her own community, she probably does not deserve this status. So, Jesus openly interacts with her, in the process offering a measure of acceptance, but he still challenges her with his teaching. He talks about living water that quenches thirst forever, he talks about the nature of true worship, he says he is the Messiah, and eventually she moves in the direction of belief, saying, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" and helps the whole community to do so. Jesus offers this woman what he offers everyone else – the realm of God and a way to find her place in it. He doesn't offer her something less or more or something different in an effort to accommodate her special situation. He offers her the same Gospel message and reality he offers everyone because this is what she needs.

The implication for us is that what we have to offer to anyone and everyone is basically the same wherever we are and with whomever we spend time - the kind of love and mercy we have known in Christ, a listening ear, a simple act of kindness, something tangible like food or clothing, a witness to who Jesus really is. Contexts may change, people may seem different, but what we have to share is the same.

I think of how we have spent the past week and may spend many more weeks. We did not plan to encounter COVID-19. It was not on my calendar, your calendar or the church's. This is a reality we have come upon in the natural flow of life, along with the rest of the world. There is nowhere to go to get away from it. It respects no borders or boundaries. But it creates an array of needs that call forth a response from us as human beings and as Christians.

The specific details of our response may seem different than our normal ministry. In the future, there may be more for us to do in the way of helping those who have suffered medically or financially, but for now we are choosing not to gather together for worship. Someone (I shouldn't name Trey Davis here) suggested I might have entitled the church communication about suspending activities "Giving up church for Lent." But in this case, not gathering in larger groups is the most loving and Christ-like thing we can do.

Our calling is always the same – to follow Jesus in doing the most loving thing for others. And right now, this is the most loving thing we can do. We are doing what we can to limit the spread of a disease that may not be a serious threat to us but definitely is a threat to the most vulnerable among us and is highly contagious. We are taking action before we can see the worst, hopefully helping to prevent the worst. Such action requires a different kind of understanding and resolve. But make no mistake - it is the right thing to do and the most Christ-like.

That is our calling always – to follow Christ. So, as he pays attention to opportunities for ministry in the natural flow of life, makes sure he hangs out with the people who need him most, and always offers love, so should we.