

**“Allowing the Ministry of Jesus to Shape Ours”**

**John 4:5–42**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**March 8, 2026**

A number of years ago while speaking at Wake Forest University, Barbara Brown Taylor told a story about a little frustration she had in her days of parish ministry. There was a man in the church she served who repeatedly ran into her as she was arriving at the church office. It was a small town. So, doing so was not unusual. It would often be around 10:00 AM, and he would inevitably say, “It must be nice to have a job where you can start work this late.”

He could have been kidding, but it didn’t seem like it. So, each time she explained that ministry does not begin or end with work in the office. The truth is some people complain that ministers spend too much time in the office and not enough time visiting people. But often visits precede office work, or sermon preparation at home does, or community meetings. And we do not clock out when we leave the building. She had explained this many times, but when she ran into him yet again while arriving, he said, “It must be nice to have a job where you can start work this late.” So, this time Barbara just smiled and said, “It sure is!”

Some people just don’t get it or don’t believe it or just like messing with their ministers, but a bigger concern related to this one is that too many church people don’t understand that the ministry of the church does not begin or end with what happens in the church house. We do significant work here with our clothing ministry and White Flag, the food truck and Toy Joy, not to mention our children’s, youth, music, adult, and senior adult ministries. But other than the mission endeavors, everything we do is meant to educate, inform, and empower us to live as faithful people in the world, where most of our ministry takes place.

This was certainly the case for Jesus. Consider the story we have read from John 4. It is very familiar, so much so that it is easy to miss some details, even those that are obvious. In this story, as in many others in the

Christian Testament, significant ministry happens not as Jesus holds office hours in the Temple or some synagogue but as he is traveling across the countryside. It happens apparently not even by plan but in the routine flow of life.

Jesus is moving across the region in this story, beyond Israel proper into a Samaritan city — we'll get to the unusual nature of that — and he just happens to run into a woman at the well around noon. Wells are gathering places, though not generally in the heat of the day, so he might expect to see someone there, but the primary reason for going is that he needs water as he walks about in a tropical region at midday.

A conversation ensues, Jesus somehow knows a great deal about the woman he has just met — we'll get to this too — and he talks to her about faith and offers living water, as in himself. In the end, she tells the whole city about this man she has met, and many Samaritans come to believe in Jesus. It is quite an effective day's work, and it happens in the world where people in need are, not inside any office or sacred space.

Such is our calling to this day — to get into the world where people in need are. In fact, getting outside the church house is one of the most critical things the church can do in this time. I have shared with some of you a story about a breakout session at a CBF General Assembly in the 1990s led by African-American pastor and CBF Coordinating Council member Michael Bell. He was addressing emergent challenges for the Black Church, and as part of the presentation, he asked what we thought people in his community most wanted to know about his church.

Perhaps something about worship, youth or children's ministries, denominational affiliation, attendees wondered, to which he said, "No." Finally, he told us, "What they want to know is, 'What are you doing in the community?'" What are you doing where we live and breathe, struggle and rejoice every day? What are you doing in the world?

That's the question for us today in terms of what the world needs and what it means to follow Jesus. What we are doing in the world is to offer various social ministries, some of which begin here but extend into the community, with clothing and food, work with Habitat for Humanity and other organizations. We organize social groups like Theology on Tap which meet in the community. We try to live each day, wherever we are, like Jesus,

listening to people, offering living water. And we seek to add our presence and voice in public spaces where human needs and justice concerns are addressed, in the work of advocacy, public protests, wherever people are hurting and our conscience leads.

Not everyone will join in the same cause, feel the same way about a given issue like immigration or the war in Iran, or even express the same view in the same way, but playing it safe in the church house while ignoring the most pressing needs around us is a sure way of hastening the demise of the church. Indeed, the world doesn't need such a church, and Jesus wouldn't recognize it! If he is our model, not all our ministry takes place here. And we might note on our 214<sup>th</sup> anniversary that this church has always embraced this part of our calling. It's why the church voted long before our time here to stay in the heart of the city, because we feel called to make a difference in the world around us.

And if Jesus is our model, there is something else we might notice in the reading from John 4. As is the case in many other Christian Testament stories once again, as Jesus goes about his ministry, he crosses all sorts of boundaries it is not customary to cross. To say this is forbidden is an overstatement. We need to be careful not to caricature first-century Judaism in a way that borders on anti-Semitism. But it is not normal for a man to speak to, much less initiate conversation with, an unknown woman, especially a Samaritan woman, a dreaded enemy!

Furthermore, the fact that she comes to the well in the heat of the day may indicate that she is an outcast, whether she should be or not. So, if we were to use a baseball metaphor, we'd have to say that Jesus has used up all three strikes at the plate! A Samaritan, woman, of questionable character. He is out... of line... but then, he never seems to care much about convention. He is more interested in remaining true to his identity and calling, the latter of which includes all people and places a priority on those who need him most.

Jesus somehow knows this woman has a complicated family history in that she has had five husbands and the person she is with now is not her husband. Many readers conclude that she is some kind of brazen hussy who has run through all these men, but this interpretation betrays an ignorance of the time and reality. Regarding the former, women don't divorce their

husbands. Only men have that power in this time and often use it for frivolous reasons — a bad meal, a more attractive woman, etc. Regarding the latter, it may be that all these men, or at least some of them, died.

The truth is we don't know why she has been married so many times or how Jesus has become aware of this, it doesn't necessarily say anything about her character, but she is likely to be judged unfairly by people in her time, as many in our time are — women who have been assaulted told they dressed provocatively, women in some evangelical circles told their husbands strayed because they didn't do enough for them in the bedroom, immigrants singled out as being violent when Justice Department data show that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes, any person of color in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We judge people unfairly, just as the Samaritan woman is most likely judged, as indicated by her noontime arrival at the well. Even if her husbands died, such events are often viewed in the first century as the result of sin, either by the person who died or someone else. To lose this many husbands... where there is smoke, there is fire... you know what they say... But even if others judge and avoid her, Jesus does not.

Jesus is willing to cross all boundaries to care for people and we are called to do the same. This church does a pretty good job of this. In fact, again on our 214<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we should note that from the very beginning, we have been on a journey moving, however imperfectly, toward an all-embracing posture that resembles Christ's in regard to race, gender, identity, nationality, level of ability, social status, economic standing, and the particular failures and disappointments we all have. This church started an AIDS care group before our time here when many churches didn't consider doing so. We have made friends with Jews and Muslims, built Habitat Houses with people of all faiths, helped people struggling with addiction. If we ask the question, "Who would Jesus not be willing to help?" we come empty and thus see our calling.

There is one other thing we might note in this story from John 4 that points to how Jesus ministers to people and thus how we might — he always extends grace and truth. The woman at the well clearly needs grace. She is surely judged and ostracized, no matter how unfairly. But she also needs

truth, not someone who pretends she has no worries, someone who sees her pain yet also sees beyond it.

We see the truth part of this clearly, as Jesus names her condition. He doesn't talk about grace directly, but he talks to her, which in and of itself is an act of grace, as indicated by the disciples' astonishment, and the very fact that the woman is energized by this encounter, so much so that she tells people in her city, seems to point to her walking away with a good feeling, not a feeling of being beaten down and judged.

Jesus always extends grace and truth, and thus we are called to do the same. We don't balance these concerns as well as Jesus nor do we always know the whole truth, as Jesus does. So, we must lean toward grace. But people need grace and truth, we all do.

On the grace side of things, I think of people going through a divorce or a job loss or perhaps facing some deep-seated personal struggle. It is not all about sin, but as a seminary professor of mine used to say, most people don't need to be told they are sinners; they need a way to something better, they need grace. To broaden this statement, most people who have known any kind of failure or discouragement know all too well their part in what happened. What they need is not someone to rehash things and point blame. What they need is grace.

When it comes to the need for truth, I think of people struggling with addictions, people determined to make it in a career for which they are not trained or gifted, people unwilling to face their fatal flaw, people convinced they can make it on their own, without anyone's help, without God. Playing it nice with these friends is no act of kindness. We can be gracious while still speaking the truth or at least our perception of it, and doing so is the nicest, most gracious, and most loving thing we can do.

Grace *and* truth are what Jesus offers. So should we, and so this church has done for 214 years in regard to personal challenges, church issues, and societal concerns. It can be a tough line to walk. Sometimes we struggle more to offer grace, other times it is hard to speak the truth, but if Jesus' ministry is to shape ours, we seek to offer both. There are many guides for ministry these days. I still like to look to Jesus first.