

COME AND SEE

Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:4:42

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TEXT: John 4:29 “[The woman] said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’”

PURPOSE: To encourage us to invite others to come and see how Jesus’ knowledge of us is experienced as saving love for us.

Guess what? God uses flawed people to accomplish God’s work. In the Bible, the list of such people is quite impressive. I’ll recall just a few: Jacob played favorites with his sons, which led to Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. Moses killed a security officer and ran from Egypt as a fugitive. King David was an adulterer with Bathsheeba. He also failed to punish one of his sons for raping his half sister, which resulted in the death of many of his sons and a bloody civil war. In the New Testament, Peter was impetuous, and in the hour of trial, he denied his relationship with Jesus. Before his conversion, Paul supported the persecution of Christians, and after his conversion, he was often demanding and inflexible.

And then there’s this Samaritan woman who Jesus asks for a drink. First of all, she was a Samaritan, a group of people despised by Jews who regarded Samaritan religious practices and beliefs as heretical. Second of all, she had a complicated relationship with men, to say the least. It’s not clear what specifically was going on in her marital relationships, except that it was not something anyone then or now would discuss in polite company. Like so many other biblical characters, she was flawed.

But her ethnicity and her relationship history did not keep her from entering into a conversation with Jesus. The first topic was water, since Jesus asked her for a drink. Right away, even that simple discussion went deeper, with the woman wondering where Jesus could get “living” water, and whether he was greater than Jacob, who dug the well, which readers of John from the first ones right down to us know he is. From there, the conversation moved to more profound matters related to worship, and climaxed with Jesus revealing himself to the woman as the Messiah, the Christ. That could have been the end of it. The woman could have professed faith in Jesus, and Jesus could have affirmed her faith, and that would have been a good enough story. But there was more to come, and the “more” turns out to be the point of the story. The woman went to tell her neighbors about her encounter with Jesus. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” she exclaimed. “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” This is a huge moment, huge because the woman’s testimony has to do with

Jesus knowing everything there is to know about her, huge because she knows, and probably her neighbors knew, that her ‘everything’ was messy, complicated, at least a little embarrassing. But what had happened was that Jesus’ knowledge of her bad news life had become the basis for her good news message to her neighbors. Thanks to Jesus her story had become part of the gospel story.

It turned out that her witness was effective. John said that many of her neighbors believed in Jesus solely on the basis of the woman’s testimony, and that, because of what she had shared, they met him and invited him to stay with them. What the woman said brought others to Jesus, and they, in turn, came to know Jesus as “the Savior of the world.” (John 4:42)

This is classic evangelism. Classic evangelism works like this: One of us has a life-changing experience of Jesus. We share that experience with others, who are intrigued, and they, in turn, connect with Jesus, and begin a new life defined by their relationship with him. What is remarkable about this particular evangelism story is the fact that the evangelist is flawed, seriously flawed. First of all, she was a Samaritan. Of course, the fact that she was a Samaritan didn’t matter to her Samaritan neighbors, but it would have been very off-putting to any of John’s earliest readers who had converted from Judaism. No self-respecting Jew would have any regard for anything any Samaritan might say. Second of all, she was a woman. Women were expected to be theologically illiterate. No one would believe that the Messiah had revealed himself to a woman. And finally, she had this complicated past and a compromised present – five former marriages, and a current relationship with a man to whom she apparently wasn’t married. But rather than take a safe route of keeping what had taken place between her and Jesus to herself, she ran off and announced it to her entire city. “Come and see!” She shouted. “There is a man who knows all there is to know about me, and meeting him is the best thing that’s ever happened to me!” Rather than hiding her flaws, or using them as an excuse not to share her good news, her flaws became the substance of her invitation to others to check Jesus out.

Jesus saw what was happening as evidence that gospel work was already bearing fruit. “Look around you,” he said to his disciples, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. (John 4:29) In other words, people were ready to receive the good news of Jesus and to be gathered into his community.

Lately, various groups here at the South Newbury Union Church have been

talking about how to share our faith. Those conversations have recognized that we cultivate a lively, genuine faith here that is welcoming, inquisitive, hopeful, engaged with the world, and deeply relational. People participating in those conversations have testified to the ways being involved here have strengthened them for facing the challenges of their lives. They've talked about the acceptance and generosity of spirit which they have experienced as basic to our life together. What we haven't talked about as much is concerns we might have about being qualified to share our faith. There have been hints of concern that we fear what our neighbors will think of us if we even come close to suggesting how our faith is blessing us. But there's been little if any recognition of our worry that our knowledge of the Bible and of Christian faith won't stand up to scrutiny. And completely unspoken in those conversations is any sense that whatever flaws we might have might disqualify us from being appropriate witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ. Who, we wonder, would respect the testimony of someone whose financial situation is unstable, or whose family relationships are conflicted, or who has a history of addiction or mental illness? Aren't the people who have triumphed over their adversities the people whose story best reflects the power of Jesus for salvation? This fear works like this: if my embarrassing past or my complicated present was found out, if my flaws in character or morality were revealed, what would people think of me, and what would they think of the faith to which I'm inviting them?

Guess what? God uses flawed people to accomplish God's purposes. Indeed, God actually knows how to use our flaws to reveal the love at work in God's complete knowledge of us. That's how God worked through the Samaritan woman, and that's how God can work through us. It works like this: first of all, God does know every little thing about us. Everything we've done, whether we're proud of it or embarrassed by it; every accomplishment and every failure; God knows it all. God knows our weaknesses, our addictions, our resentments, and our ill will toward others. The Samaritan woman realized that Jesus didn't only know about her husbands; she said, "He told me *everything* I have ever done." God knows it all, but the amazing thing is that we experience God's complete knowledge of us as absolutely unconditional love for us. The One-hundred-thirty-ninth Psalm is the favorite of many people. It declares, "God, you have searched me and known me; you are acquainted with all my ways." (Psalm 139:1) And then: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me." (Psalm 139:6) The Psalmist doesn't come right out and say, "I'm sure you love me even though you know all there is to know about me." But how could this be such a beloved Psalm

if reading how thoroughly God knows us made us feel that God was judging us?

Second of all, hear this testimony from the apostle Paul: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29) In other words, God makes a point of enlisting people who aren’t the world’s winners because those people know they are nothing apart from the grace of God. This is what I know about myself: God’s love for me connects with me most profoundly where I am flawed, where I have failed, where I am ashamed of what I’ve done and what I’ve left undone. And it is my confidence that God loves me even though God knows everything I’ve ever done which fuels my enthusiasm for sharing God’s love for others. It is because Jesus knows the bad news of my life that I can share the good news of his love.

And finally, this: the woman obviously was so overwhelmed by her encounter with Jesus that it stopped mattering what people thought of her. All that mattered to her was what people thought of Jesus. I don’t think this is something we can force. I think it’s something that overtakes us. It is what happens when we become convinced that God really does love us even though God knows everything we’ve ever done.

I believe the fields remain ripe for harvesting. What we see is a decline in interest in things “churchy.” Church for many people around us is a place that’s stuffy, or irrelevant, or a place which judges us because of our flaws. True enough, which means we need to do what we can to change those perceptions. But keep in mind that the point is not to bring people to church; the point is to bring people to Jesus. Church is simply the vehicle we have to reveal the transforming love of Jesus, the means by which we offer community gathered around his grace. It is now our opportunity to invite people to come and see, to come and see how amazing it is for Jesus to know us perfectly, and for that perfect knowledge to overtake us as perfect love. It is our opportunity to see what happens when what matters is what others think of Jesus, not what they think of us as we tell of Jesus and his love. His living water wants to overflow grace from us to those around us. So come and experience how transforming it is for us and for others to be the means by which – just as we are, our whole story – Jesus gets to be shared with others who need his saving love.