

“HOLY CONVERSATIONS”

John 4:5-15, 25-29, 39-42 March 19, 2017

Here are a few questions for you to consider this morning:

Why are you here today?

Why are you a Christian?

Why do you follow Jesus?

Why have you confessed Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promised to serve him as your Lord in union with the church that Christ has opened to all people of all ages, nations, & races?

Why have you committed yourself, according to the grace given in you, to be a faithful member of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s representatives in the world?

How are you living out this vow made at your baptism?

Short pause..... All right, okay! This is too many questions to think about, let alone answer even after a short few minutes to consider them...I totally understand that these questions take a lifetime to answer. Actually, our answers come not so much from what we say, but from how we live. Anyway, it’s important to put the questions before us, especially as we consider the story of the Samaritan woman alongside our second baptismal vow:

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his Grace and promise to serve him as Lord, in union with the church Christ opens to people of all ages, nations, and races? Will you commit yourself, according to the grace given in you, to be a faithful member of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s representative in the world?

This story about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is a really amazing story when you think about it. Although many scholars have portrayed her as not just uneducated, but the worst kind of sinner—divorced multiple times, of loose morals, and a follower of the wrong religion, it is important to notice how intelligent she come across in this conversation with Jesus. She really holds her own! As Bonnie Thurston notes in Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary:

The Samaritan woman is, in fact, one of the most theologically informed persons in the Fourth Gospel. She knows the regulations about ritual purity (v. 9), ancestral traditions of Israel (v. 12), the necessity to worship at a valid temple (v. 19-20), and the expectations of a Messiah (v. 25). She is, in short, conversant in Samaritan theology (which is not surprising since, unlike Jews, Samaritans educated religiously both male and female children), and Jesus takes her seriously as a discussion partner as he did Nicodemus in the preceding chapter.

Thurston proposes that this encounter brings to a climax a series of conversations with a number of different people in John's gospel that show individuals progressively living *into* their understanding of who Jesus is. For Thurston, the Samaritan woman serves as the climax of these encounters: the fullest and most confident example of a true believer. Not only does she hold her own in a difficult and complex conversation, but in contrast to Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness, she comes to Jesus at noontime, out in the open, at a public well, and in the full light of day!!

While other religious authorities, including Nicodemus, whom we talked about last week, are consistently skeptical about who Jesus might be, this woman

comes not only to have faith in Jesus Christ, but to go public with her experience. John reports that after this encounter, she immediately heads to her village where she confesses to others that she has met the long-awaited Messiah. In so doing, she becomes the world's very first Christian missionary. By the end of the story, we learn that because of her testimony about what has happened to her and "because of her word," others have come to believe in the good news of Jesus Christ!

So what convinced her? What caused this woman to confess Jesus as her Savior, put her whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as her Lord?

Part of what convinced her, no doubt, is that Jesus knew not just her life story, but what was in her heart, and this knowledge did not cause him to reject her or turn away from her. But the more compelling thing is that he offers her living water that will not just quench her thirst temporarily, it will quench her thirst eternally.

This interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a conversation. Jesus suggest that conversation matters for theology. That conversation is essential for faith. Unfortunately, observe how religious dialogue happens today—"I'm right. You're wrong. So there." We are living in a time when conversation needs to be cultivated and valued. Practiced and pursued. Longed for and lived. Without real conversation, we lack intimacy and understanding; connection and empathy. Without real conversation ,we risk detachment and distance.

No wonder Jesus engages in and insists on conversation when it comes to believing, since believing in John's Gospel is synonymous with relationship. It matters that Jesus' revelation of who he is to her and her realization of who he can be for her happens in conversation. Their conversation is an essential part of what

true relationships look like—mutuality, reciprocity, and regard.

The church can be the place that shows society what theological conversation can sound like. The church can be the place that demonstrates how dialogue about faith and the Bible might result in religious respect and tolerance. With this mandate, what does faithful conversation, theological conversation look like? The dialogues between the Samaritan woman at the well and Jesus provides an outline that not only offers features that model conversational speech but also points to the very nature of God.

First, we note that the conversation begins with mutual vulnerability. Jesus is thirsty and she needs the water that only Jesus can provide. That is where truthful conversations must start—from a place of reciprocal vulnerability, from a space that recognizes that each party risks being known and being seen. How many conversations begin with expectation of vulnerability, yet theological conversations have to start there because this is a fundamental characteristic of God.

Second, questions are critical to conversation. Not questions that have already decided on the right answers. Not questions that are asked only to pretend manners. No, questions that communicate curiosity, an interest in the other, a longing for information and understanding. The woman at the well is full of questions, thoughtful questions, questions that matter and lead Jesus to reveal to her who he really is. Jesus affirms questions, even invites them. God wants us to ask questions because it is questions that strengthen relationship.

Third, conversations for the sake of intentional and genuine interest in the other take time. They take time because there will likely be moments of misunderstanding. The Samaritan woman is first confused by Jesus' offer, but unlike Nicodemus, she does not let that stop the conversation. You noticed that the text

this morning again was a dialogue. You experienced it that way and hung in there for a different way to present the day's text. It seems that God is willing to hang in there, too. To keep on listening. To keep on exposing God's heart so that it can be seen for the abundant love it holds.

Fourth, when it comes to having a conversation with Jesus or about Jesus, expect to be surprised. Expect God to reveal something about God's self that you have never seen before. The unnamed woman at the well is the first one to whom Jesus reveals his true identity—I AM, the first absolute I AM in the Gospel of John—not to the Jewish leaders or to the disciples, but to her, a religious, social, political outsider. This is whom God is for because God loves the world.

The final characteristic of theological conversation is to anticipate being changed in the process. The woman at the well goes from shamed to witness. From dismissed to disciple. From alone to being a sheep of Jesus' own fold. So we need to keep talking—to having meaningful conversations—holy conversations about things that really matter.

Jesus had that kind of conversation with the Samaritan woman when he offered her the “living water.” What is the living water that Jesus provides? It is that which saves, especially, the least and the lost, the rejected and disenfranchised, the oppressed and suffering, who live among us. Once we drink the living water Jesus offers, we can no longer be satisfied by what physical water alone provides, whether for economic gain brought about by proximity to the transportation that a river offers or our basic human need for relief from dehydration.

Physical water can only satisfy our physical needs.

The living water Jesus Christ provides satisfies our eternal thirst. “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water

that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4: 13B-14, NRSV).

As those who have, in our baptismal vows, confessed “Jesus Christ is our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promised to serve him as Lord, in union with the church Christ opens to people of all ages, nations and races,” our experience of drinking the living water offered in Christ is the same as that of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at a well under the noon day sun all those generations ago. It is life changing. It is deeply satisfying in a way nothing else is.

Not only is our experience the same; our mission is the same as well. Once we have tasted the living water that has become in us a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, we become compelled to offer that water to others. How do we do that? By our testimony, both with our words and through our self-giving actions.

In his new booklet, *The Meaning of Baptism in the United Methodist Church*, author Mark Stamm makes a direct connection between our responsibility to the world made in our baptismal vows and the living water Jesus offered to the Samaritan woman at the well:

We take up the baptismal calling of the church to intercede for the world, and to continue to live more deeply into the mind of Christ. In the lifelong pilgrimage with the church begun in baptism, we discover again and again that our purpose in life is deeply tied up with giving ourselves in service to others. In baptism, we step into the flow of living water, and in it we experience, now, already, a foretaste of heaven.

Stepping into the Living Water: On the Ritual Practice of Baptism

Jesus told a Samaritan woman he could offer her “living water.” He said, “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty” (Jn. 4:13) When we receive this living water, says Jesus, our deepest needs are satisfied. More than

that, initiated into the flow of living water, we become part of God's blessing to the world, participants in the "spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Becoming a part of that gracious flow satisfies many of our deepest longings, for God created us to "give ourselves for others." Self-giving is at the heart of the life of the Trinity into which we are baptized. We are at once most deeply human and closest to God when we give ourselves in love.

The good news is that the living water offered by Jesus Christ is available to all—Samaritan or Jew, Christian or Muslim, black or brown or white, female or male, slave or free, rich or poor, able-bodied or differently-abled, gay or straight—it doesn't matter. God's grace is offered to all who will drink of it.

We who have drunk of this living water, we who have come to faith and who claim faith in Jesus Christ, can only testify to what drinking of the living water of Jesus Christ has done for us. We cannot give the living water of faith to others. But we can become part of God's blessing to the world. We can join in God's mission by giving ourselves in love. And we can commit ourselves anew, according to the grace given to us, to be representatives of Jesus Christ in the world, and, through our words and self-giving actions, point people to the only one who can give us the living water that we most need.

With God's help, let it be so. Amen and amen.