

A SURPRISING INVITATION

John 4:5-26

Jesus breaks down the barriers to a relationship with God.

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
March 12, 2023

Sometimes surprises are good. One of the most memorable and surprising nights of my teenage years was my fifteenth birthday. My family had just moved to a new town a year earlier, and I had struggled to fit in at a new junior high school, to make new friends, and to get used to a new community and a new church. It was not terrible, but I still wasn't sure if I was "part of the group" yet.

My big plans for my fifteenth birthday included going out to dinner with my mom and dad and my little brother. I was *so* excited. Before we went out, my dad and I had to run a couple of errands. When we got home, my mom sent me into the living room to check the carpet. We had a new little puppy, and we didn't want to find any of his "surprises" later.

When I rounded the corner of that dark room, the lights flashed on and about 20 teenagers yelled "Surprise!" I almost died of a heart attack at the age of fifteen! I was totally taken by surprise. All of a sudden my plans changed, and we had a party going on! Also all of a sudden, I didn't feel like an outsider any more; I had all these people who had lied to me and scared the pants off of me. I was their friend. I was included.

Jesus had a surprise for the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob, too. Although she didn't get it at first, it soon became a good surprise—a word of good news. Before it was all over, there was a party going on. The woman and her whole village were celebrating their salvation.

Jacob's well is still there in the Holy Land today. The town of Sychar is now called Sebaste, and it's in the embattled territory set apart for Palestinians. But on our last Holy Land trip, we visited Jacob's well. A church has been built on top of it, but you can go into the basement and drink from the well, which I did. The water was cool and sweet.

We can go back to Jacob's well today. Jesus meets us at the well and offers us a surprising invitation. He gives us living water. He brings the good news of salvation. Jesus breaks down the barriers to a relationship with God. Let's look at those barriers in the context of this wonderful story.

First of all, **Jesus breaks down the barrier of social convention.** If there was anything you could be sure of in the days of Jesus, it was this: Jews and Samaritans did not get along. They looked on each other with prejudice, contempt, and hatred. Though they shared a lot of the same history, there was no interaction between the groups, unless it was hostile.

We are not unfamiliar with that attitude today, are we? We still have Jews and Palestinians to give us a bad example. Tensions in the Mideast are not much different today than they were then. Much closer to home, there are still undertones of prejudice and hostility for people who are not like us. Differences of race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and politics still divide people. We are all recovering bigots.

Sometimes this prejudice even extends to the church. You know, church is only for certain kinds of people—well-dressed, intelligent, educated, conservative—you know what I mean. We erect barriers—sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally—to keep the undesirables out. In God’s eyes, this is wrong. Author and speaker Tony Evans says, “Racism isn’t a bad habit; it’s not a mistake; it’s a sin. The answer is not sociology; it’s theology.”¹ That can be applied to all your “-isms.”

Jesus is making a theological point when he speaks to the woman at the well. He is reaching across the barrier of social convention. He is speaking to a person who is both a Samaritan and a woman—two big taboos. He is breaking the rules made by humans in order to reach out to a child of God. The Samaritan woman is surprised: “*How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?*”²

She was probably also surprised that Jesus talked to her because nobody else would. She was alone, coming to the well at noon. Nobody came to get water at noon; the day was half done. The women gathered at the well early in the morning to get water and to visit and see their neighbors. This woman was not a part of that fellowship; in a few verses, we’ll understand why. But the fact was, not only was she excluded by race and religion and gender from fellowship with the Jews, she was also an outcast among her own people. Can you imagine the loneliness she must have felt?

But Jesus reached out to her anyway and invited her to drink of his living water that would never leave her thirsty again. Beyond the barriers of social convention, he could see a valuable person, a worthwhile individual, a precious child of his Father, a sinner he would one day die for. Deep down, Jesus could see God in her.

I read a story once about a dealer in precious stones who was strolling down the aisle at a Gem and Mineral Show in Tucson, Arizona, when he spotted a bluish violet stone about the size of a potato. He looked it over, and then, as nonchalantly as he could, he asked the vendor, “You want \$15 for this?”

The seller, trying to make a deal, lowered the price to \$10 for this nondescript piece of blue rock. The gem dealer bought it, cleaned it up, and had it certified as a 1,905-carat natural star sapphire, over twice as big as the next largest stone of its kind. It appraised at \$2.28 million.³

It takes a careful eye to recognize the true worth of a jewel, especially if that jewel is human. But the actions of Jesus speak loud and clear. No matter what your race, nationality, gender, or socio-economic level is, you are one of God’s precious jewels. Jesus reaches across the barriers of social convention to invite us into a relationship with God.

The second barrier Jesus breaks down is sin. After it is obvious that the Samaritan woman was not getting the living water analogy, Jesus took the direct approach. He asked the woman to go get her husband. She says she didn't have a husband. Jesus said, "Yeah, you don't have one husband. You have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband." That's why she didn't get her water with the other women; they didn't want her around. She had probably been with some of their husbands. Her lifestyle excluded her from polite company. So they shut her out.

But Jesus loved her too much to do that. Instead, he confronted her situation because he knew that she could not drink the living water if her life was polluted by sin. You don't have to be clean to come to God, but you have to get clean to stay with God. Sin creates a barrier to a relationship with God.

Fortunately, with the conviction comes the pardon. Once we admit we are sinners, God provides a way to find forgiveness—through the One who breaks down the barrier. First John puts it this way: "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. ...If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world.*"⁴ That's the good news! All our sins are covered by the sacrifice of Christ—all of mine and all of yours and all of everyone else's who has ever lived. That's a powerful thought! But we need the power, because we all sin and fall short of the glory of God.

Kenneth Bedell ran into a Samaritan-like figure one day in the subway of New York City. Kenneth grew up in Spirit Lake, Iowa, and was raised in the Methodist Church there. Over and over he heard the instruction to "love one another." After high school, Kenneth moved to New York City, and one day in the subway, he noticed a street person, an old man in a long, dirty coat, long, stringy hair, and a matted beard. He was struggling to get some candy out of a vending machine. He noticed Kenneth looking at him and asked him for some help. He held out his hand and showed Kenneth his money, so Kenneth took it and put it in the machine and pulled the lever the man wanted, and the candy came out.

Then a surprising thing happened. The man said to Kenneth, "Here. Get one for yourself." He held out some coins in his grimy hand. Kenneth refused, not wanting any candy really, and not wanting to take the bum's last few coins. As he refused, Kenneth laughed nervously, and the old man took his laughter to be ridicule. He lashed out in anger, "Laugh at me! You kids are all alike. You think you're so smart. I'm not stupid! I have money! Why do you laugh at me?"

Now Kenneth felt bad because he had hurt the old man's feelings, but his train was pulling into the station, and he had to go, so he turned away, saying, "I didn't mean to make you angry...I just didn't want any candy." The street person took a big step forward, then he smiled and said, "It's okay. I love you. I love you anyway."

As Kenneth boarded the subway, he felt for the first time the reality of what he had been taught growing up. He had hurt someone, yet the old man had been able to rise above the hurt and say, "I love you anyway."⁵

When we turn away from God, when we refuse the sweet offer of his grace, when we build a barrier around ourselves with sin, it hurts God deeply. But he loves us anyway.

He sent his Son to break down the barrier of sin so we could return to a relationship with him.

Finally, Jesus breaks down the barrier of boxed-in thinking. Jesus offers us a new way of looking at life that is not determined by the way we've always looked at it before. He brings us a new possibility.

The Samaritan woman's thinking is boxed in two ways. First, she cannot get the concept of "living water." This was the usual phrase for a flowing stream or river. How could a well hold living water? She can't get her mind out of that box when Jesus tells her that his living water will last for eternity. That sounds impossible, but wouldn't it be great not to have to come in the middle of the day and haul water ever again? She doesn't conceive of the spiritual truth. Her mind is in a box.

Then, when Jesus starts to meddle with her sinful lifestyle, she tries to start a religious argument. She brings up the controversy between the Jews and the Samaritans about where God could properly be worshipped—the Temple in Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim in Samaria.

If you want to avoid God, bring up religion. You can argue theology all day long and never have to confront the claim that God is making on your life. The arguments still abound: Are we "once saved, always saved," or can we fall from grace? Should we be baptized by immersion or sprinkling? Is the Book of Revelation describing events in the first century or the 21st century? Are you going to be a "United" Methodist or a "Global" Methodist?

Jesus refuses to get sucked into religious controversy. Instead, he says that there is only one thing that matters about worship: Are you worshipping in Spirit and in truth? Are you open to God? Can you conceive of a new possibility for your life, outside the box of conventional thinking?

With God, you are never boxed in by social prejudices, past sins, or religious controversies. Jesus breaks down all the barriers to a relationship with God. You are never so far away that you can't come home. Whether you're a Samaritan woman standing alone by the well or just a sinner in Fort Smith, Arkansas, there is always a new possibility in Jesus. You can think outside the box; you can start a new life; you can drink the living water.

So let me share with you, as radio commentator Paul Harvey used to say, the rest of the story. Finally, the woman began to get a clue, and she dropped a hint, "I know Messiah is coming and will teach us everything." Jesus said, "You're looking at him, kid." She got all excited and ran into the village and told everyone, "*Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?*"⁶ The people came out to see Jesus, and when they heard him, they invited him to stay. That invitation was surprising enough, coming from Samaritans, but Jesus and the disciples did stay for two days! In that two-day revival, many of the Samaritans came to believe in Jesus. They told the woman, "*It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that truly this is the Savior of the world.*"⁷ Her witness had brought them to Christ, close enough to touch, but now their faith was their own, and there was a celebration going on!

Here is the invitation: Jesus offers you the living water today. Do you feel like a social outcast, standing alone by yourself? Maybe you've been through a divorce or the loss of a spouse. Maybe you've lost a job or had some financial reversals. Maybe you're

just trying to grow up, and it's awkward. Maybe you're wondering today just how you're supposed to fit in. Surprise! Jesus offers you the living water of community.

Maybe you feel cut off from God today because of some sin in your life that you have not confessed, or there's guilt from a past mistake that you have not resolved. Surprise! Jesus offers you the living water of forgiveness.

Maybe you just feel like your life in general and your spiritual life in particular are in a huge rut—same ol' same ol' day after day. A rut is just a grave with the ends knocked out; you don't want to live there. Today Jesus offers you the living water of abundant life. You can break through the barriers. Dive in; drink deeply; and live!

¹ Anthony Evans, *Leadership*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

² John 4:8.

³ Wanda Vassallo, *Leadership*, Vol. 17, No. 1.

⁴ I John 1:8—2:2.

⁵ From a sermon by Dr. Rodney Wilmoth.

⁶ John 4:29.

⁷ John 4:42.