

3.8.26 Sermon on John 4:5-42

I feel like I have been starting my sermons out with confessions the last couple of weeks – first last week it was the confession that I wrote my sermon at 2 in the morning that day. Today I begin with this confession: Even though I’ve been doing this work for years now, of preaching, leading, organizing, teaching, trying to help guide communities in faith, I still regularly struggle with something that a lot of people call imposter syndrome.

There are days when I look at everything that needs to be done in the world and I think, “I have no idea what I’m doing,” or “I’m not doing enough.” There are days when I read someone else’s writing or hear someone else preach and I think, “They’re so much better at this than I am.” There are days when I lie awake at night replaying conversations in my head, wondering if I said the wrong thing, wondering if I should have done more, wondering if I’m actually the right person to be doing this work at all. I suspect I’m not the only one who feels that way sometimes. Many of us probably carry some version of these questions inside us. “Am I doing enough? Am I good enough? Am I enough?”

For some of us, it shows up at work, for others it shows up in parenting. For some of us it shows up in relationships. For others it shows up in faith. We try to be kind enough, or generous enough, faithful enough, or productive enough. It is a quiet question that sits underneath much of human life, even if we rarely say it out loud. Am I enough?

Am I enough to belong? Am I enough to be loved? Am I enough to be known without having to prove myself first? Most of us learn very early that the world tends to answer that question with conditions. You are enough if you succeed, or you are enough if you perform well. You are enough if you meet expectations: if you get the right grades, build the right career, if you say the right things, if you maintain the right image.

But if you fail in some visible way, if your life takes a complicated turn, if you carry a story that others might judge or misunderstand, then suddenly you can find yourself feeling like you no longer quite belong. When that happens, we learn to manage what others see. We become curators of our own image, or we put on masks that hide parts of ourselves. We hide parts of our story and present the version of ourselves we hope will be acceptable to others. We try to keep control of the narratives about who we are.

And as we do that, without even realizing it, we start to believe that our worth depends on what we do or do not do, which is why the story we just read from John’s Gospel is so powerful. Jesus is traveling through Samaria, and he stops at a well. John tells us that Jesus is tired. He’s been out in the heat of the day, when the sun just zaps you of all energy. He sits down at the well, ready for a break around noon. And soon a Samaritan woman comes to draw water. Now before anyone even says a word, the scene is full of tension.

You may recall that Jews and Samaritans had centuries of hostility between them. Their communities distrusted each other deeply. On top of that, in the cultural world of the first century, men and women who were strangers did not normally speak alone in public. Then there's that detail about the time of day. Most women in a village would gather water in the cooler hours of the morning or evening. It was a social activity. People came together. They talked. They shared news. It was the office water cooler of the ancient Near East. But this woman is there at noon. She is alone. This fact suggests that she may have been someone who learned to keep her distance. She was someone who was used to having to navigate at the edges of the community. She was someone who probably asked herself the question daily, "Am I enough?" And the community would have, of course, reinforced a negative response: No, she is not enough. She does not belong.

So here they are, in this unexpected meeting, and Jesus surprises her by starting a conversation. He says, "Give me a drink." It's such a simple sentence, but it crosses multiple boundaries all at once: ethnic boundaries, religious boundaries, gender boundaries, social boundaries.

The woman immediately recognizes how strange this is. She responds to Jesus, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?" In other words: Why are you even talking to me? But Jesus keeps talking with her, and what unfolds is one of the longest recorded conversations Jesus has with anyone in the Gospel of John.

Let's pause and think about that for a minute. The longest conversation Jesus has in John's gospel is speaking with someone who was overlooked and pushed aside. Early in the conversation, Jesus tells her something curious. He says that if she knew who he was, she would ask him for "living water." At first she misunderstands him. She looks at the well and says, essentially, "You don't even have a bucket. Where are you going to get this water?"

But Jesus isn't talking about filling a bucket. He's talking about life – a life that flows from relationship with God rather than performance for God or anyone else. He's talking about a life that does not run dry because it does not depend on constantly having to prove her worth.

And then the conversation takes another turn. Jesus begins naming parts of her story – the parts that she probably tried to hide, even though everyone knew anyway. He names the parts of her story that she was ashamed to name out loud. He acknowledges the complexity of her relationships.

Now, for centuries, people have sometimes interpreted this moment as Jesus exposing her moral failure. But if you really listen, the tone of the story doesn't feel like condemnation. It feels instead like recognition. Jesus sees her. And that word matters, because being seen is

not the same thing as being noticed. People are noticed all the time. We are categorized, evaluated, labeled. We might get noticed for our job titles or political positions, we might get noticed for our reputations or our mistakes. But to be seen means something deeper. To be seen means someone recognizes our full humanity. It means our story does not get reduced to a stereotype or to the lowest point of our lives. It means someone looks past the surface and acknowledges that there is a whole person there, complex, wounded, hopeful, capable of change.

That is what Jesus does here. He names her story, even the hidden parts, but he does not weaponize it against her. He acknowledges her past, but he does not reduce her to it. He knows her life, and still he stays in conversation with her. He does not use that knowledge to make her subservient or less than. That kind of seeing is rare.

Some of you have heard Monty talk about the book Theo of Golden (which again, another confession here, I have not yet read). This book has inspired Monty's regular practice of drawing sketches of individuals. He usually does this during our Friday night meals or indoor breakfasts. As he sketches the individual, he just talks with them about their lives. Many of the folks whom Monty draws have never had an experience like that. For Monty, it is a practice of seeing – not just noticing, but seeing. When we can truly see one another, not for what we do or don't do, not for our successes or failings, we are restoring dignity to one another.

And that is the moment the Samaritan woman experiences at the well. She meets someone who knows her whole story and still treats her with dignity. There's no rejection, no lecture, or conditions for belonging. There is just relationship. This encounter deeply changed the Samaritan woman's life. And this story can also deeply change ours.

Many of us, at some point, carry the quiet assumption that our relationship with God is conditional because we experience conditional love in so many other areas of our lives. But we carry that over to God and we think that if God really knew the whole story, our doubts, our regrets, our failures, God might pull away.

But in this story, Jesus knows everything, and still he stays. The foundation of the relationship is not her worthiness. It is God's willingness to be in relationship. And when that truth begins to take root, something else begins to change. For the woman, she was alone, she lacked resources, she lacked community. Her life was plagued by scarcity. But Jesus helps her see the truth – that God's abundance of love and generosity are not dependent upon her, and they are not dependent upon her community's assessment of her.

She goes to the well looking to get a little bit of water – she goes alone, when she doesn't have to be in competition with others from her community that would gossip about her, shun her, or withhold shared resources from her. She probably felt like she needed to get in there quickly, eek out what little bit of water she could, and get out of there so she could take it home and protect it. Fear was probably her constant companion.

But in this encounter with Jesus, she begins to when trust that her worth is not earned but given, and that she already belongs in the heart of God. Something opened up for that woman. She became freer – freer to share, to welcome, to participate in God's abundant life. And that's exactly what happens in this story.

At the end of the conversation, the woman leaves her water jar behind and runs back into the town. Think about that detail. She came to the well for water, but she leaves the jar behind. She does not feel the need to cling to what has always felt like a scarce resource, because something more important has happened. she goes back to the very community she may had been avoiding and says: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done." Notice what she does not say. She doesn't say, "Come see the man who judged me." She says, "Come see the man who saw me."

Being seen with compassion changes people. People who once felt like outsiders begin to imagine that they might belong. People who were hiding begin to step back into community. People who were grasping for worth begin to trust that life might actually be abundant, and that abundance spreads.

The whole town comes out to meet Jesus. It begins with one conversation at a well, and it becomes a movement of grace across an entire community. The Gospel invites us into that same discovery. Our worth is not determined by what we achieve. Our worth is not determined by our failures. Our worth is grounded in the fact that God desires relationship with us.

When we begin to trust that truth, generosity stops feeling like an obligation, and it becomes a response. We share because we are no longer trying to prove ourselves. We give because we trust that God's life is abundant enough for everyone. We welcome others because we know what it feels like to be seen. The woman came to the well searching for water, but what she found was something deeper. She found a God who sees her, knows her, and still chooses relationship. That kind of grace turns strangers into neighbors, scarcity into abundance, and ordinary wells into places where living water begins to flow. Today, may we be seen. And may we learn to truly see others through the generous heart of Jesus Christ. Amen.