

A Daring Request

John 4:5-42

Jesus was not one to let things slide. Jesus challenged common practices. Jesus challenged norms, biases, and practices that exclude.

The season of Lent is a season of accountability. It's a season where we deepen our trust in God and learn to use our best judgement, as demonstrated by Jesus. We, during the season of Lent, have been inviting each other to practice wisdom. To listen deeply to one another. To hear the wisdom that is spoken through each of us, through the Holy Spirit, and in our world. Jesus is a living example of discerning how to live as God intended.

Now, both passages of scripture today tell us that through faith, we come to understand that perfection is not necessary for us to be loved by God. Perfection is not necessary for us to be loved. We do not need to justify ourselves. How does this scripture about suffering and endurance, as well as the story of the Samaritan woman who offers Jesus a cup of water help us to learn and grow in hope, becoming better human beings? What motivates us to become better?

In *A Song of Faith*, the most recent United Church credal statement, we say this:

“We are all touched by the brokenness in this world. We know how the rise of selfish individualism can erode human solidarity, and so we dare, like Jesus, to challenge rules that no longer fit, or that could potentially harm others. Jesus shows us a different way when he daringly challenges cultural expectations, norms, and rules.”

What often erodes our relationships is our misplaced belief that we are called to be perfect. Our fear of being seen as lesser, unsuccessful or wrong, has led us often to do more harm, even when it was not our intention. I personally have seen the effects of how one verse in the Bible can harm a person. The first verse in Romans 5 says: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand. We boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God.” These simple words – “We are justified by faith” – can easily be twisted. Can easily be used to harm others. Can lead

to all sorts of harmful behaviour and religious trauma. Some people have been told that they are sick or can't be healed because they do not have enough faith. Or maybe they haven't been praying hard enough.

I don't believe that is what the scriptures are saying. Let's look at the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman again: in this exchange at the well, the Samaritan woman is coming to faith, coming to know Jesus. Jesus, in that moment, speaks the truth to her. And even though she doesn't fully understand, something draws her to believe. At one point in the conversation, Jesus asks her the question about her husband, and she answers Jesus with a half-truth. She replies, "I have no husband," which is true. I think we can all sympathize with this woman for why she did that. She has probably faced so much judgement from other people because she has had, as Jesus said, five husbands, one of whom isn't actually her husband right now. Back in those days, that would have been seen as very bad.

How did Jesus know this? She concludes that he must be a prophet. And it isn't until she leaves the well that suddenly she wonders if he is the Messiah. If he is the chosen one of God I think, for me, the key verse in this passage is when the woman says, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did." The good, the bad, the ugly. The words that were not spoken are these: "And he loved me anyways." Jesus offered her grace. Jesus offered her love. And she didn't have to justify herself to him. In fact, he wanted her to be honest and open.

If we go back to Romans, Paul says, "We should boast in our afflictions, knowing that these afflictions produce endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." Why? Because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. That is the living water. That is what has been poured into us through our faith. We are offered grace freely. We start from a place of love and grace. And that is what Jesus offered this woman: acceptance, love, and grace.

Paul's understanding of God and his theology on the justification of faith is actually about relationship. We are called into relationship with God and with one another. Jesus, in that brief encounter with the woman at the well, is not focused on his personal need or thirst, although it may seem that way with his first question. In that moment, his focus is on his relationship with this stranger. A person he has never met. And when the disciples return to Jesus and saw him speaking to this woman, they didn't question his motivation. They didn't question why he was breaking the rules again. Maybe this has become so normal in their time with Jesus that they just accepted that he was going to push the boundaries.

The disciples, instead, focused on something very practical. The disciples said: “Jesus, you must be hungry. Please eat something.” But Jesus replied, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” Like the woman, when Jesus spoke of water that would quench our thirst forever, the disciples were left wondering what Jesus meant by him having the food he needed to never be hungry again. How does our faith nourish our souls, feed our souls? And how do we find hope in the midst of our suffering and tribulations? How do we find energy to keep going, to find that endurance that will eventually lead us to hope? And what barriers do we need to cross so that all may have life and have it in abundance?

Some of you may know that Tuesday March 14th is Pie Day. Yes, you can eat pie. But that’s not what it’s really about. Pie day is National Affirming Day. Pie, in this case, stands for Public Intentional Explicit inclusion of the LGBTQ2SIA people. At Robertson-Wesley, we are an affirming church, and this day is a reminder to live according to our Statement of Welcome and Inclusion in a very intentional, explicit, and public way. Jesus encountered the woman at the well. He was supposed to ignore. But instead, he was fulfilling what God had called him to do on earth: to be intentional, to be public, and to engage in conversation, share a cup of water, to treat this woman with dignity and to see her value. I hope that this story inspires each of us to see the worth in humanity in every person we meet. In every encounter we have. May Jesus’ bold request and bold decision to intentionally cross barriers that divide us inspire us to do the same thing.

I want to end today by sharing a prayer that was created by the *Centre for Action and Contemplation*. This prayer is to help us, as individuals, name our biases. To be aware of how our biases can create invisible barriers between people. May we learn to offer freely what we have been offered by God: grace, understanding and love. So let us pray:

“Revealer of insight, do not let me be satisfied to see only what is visible from my limited perspective. Grant me an insatiable curiosity to understand what my neighbours can see from their different vantage points. Help me draw near to them, to walk with them, to see through their eyes, hear through their ears and to feel through their experience, so our shared horizons will be broadened. Amen.”