



November 25, 2012
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All Things New:
New Evangelism 2
John 4: Selected readings

I hope you had a great Thanksgiving. Our Thanksgiving Eve service was a highlight for me. Beautiful decoration, Kevin led us in wonderful worship. And our brand new pastors, Larry and Megan, preached a tag-team sermon which was absolutely captivating, and then served their first communion. It was an anointed evening, wasn't it?

There was one moment, however, that wasn't so anointed. I asked my son Cooper to remove the pulpit after the sermon while they were still praying so that we would have an unobstructed view of the communion table. Subtle, discreet... a perfect plan. Only problem was I failed to explain it to the Hackmans. When they started praying, Cooper looked over at me. I nodded. He offered me an "Are you sure?" look. "Yes," I nodded vigorously, "I'm sure!" And gave him the Dad finger-point. So, Cooper walked over, reached up to grab the pulpit while they were still praying and began pulling on it. Pastor Larry, who was not expecting this, felt the pulpit moving and started clutching it. Cooper looked at me. I nodded again. So he gave a vigorous tug on the podium, wrenched it out of Larry's grasp, flipped the thing sideways, and threw their notes and Bibles all over the floor!

Everyone in the front rows was either laughing riotously or was horrified. When Cooper sat down I leaned over and whispered, "Son, why would you disrupt worship that way?" Anyhow... my bad. But it was pretty funny, and a good example of how doing the right thing at the wrong time is always the wrong thing. Timing is everything, isn't it? And we discover that this morning as we return to one of the most memorable stories in John, the woman at the well. [Read 1-15]

Those of us who know Jesus and know anything about this book, know that we are "supposed" to share the good news of God's salvation with those who are still lost. But as we discussed last week, the word "evangelism" has such a lousy reputation today that even the most devoted Christian can get squeamish at the idea of "being an evangelist." But when we eavesdrop on this conversation between Jesus and this woman, we learn a new way of doing evangelism... the "Jesus way."

Believe it or not, Advent begins next week. John doesn't have a Christmas story in his gospel. The closest thing is 1:14: *The Word became flesh and made his*

dwelling among us. We have beheld his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Notice those last five words? "Full of grace and truth." The remarkable thing about Jesus is that he brings together perfectly those two qualities: grace and truth. That is hard to do! People tend to err one way or the other. Some of us are "gracers." We tend to be merciful and forgiving. When someone blows it, our heart goes out to them; we are quick to forgive and encourage to prop them back up. How many gracers do we have here this morning? The weak side of "gracers" is that we can treat folks like spiritually spoiled children; don't hold them accountable, avoid talking about painful issues, dole out mercy without consequences or the expectation of changed behavior. Unfettered grace makes people rotten.

Then there are the "truthers." Truthers wouldn't know the gift of mercy if it bit them on their Blessed Assurances. They are moral, upstanding, honest and virtuous and they expect that of others. How many truthers do we have? The truther's shadow mission is to tell others the "way it is" however painful and destructive that revelation. Unfettered truth makes people unbearable.

So what does this have to do with our story? In his encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus is the perfect balance of grace and truth. Last week was about what? Grace! Jesus walks right into Samaria, the land of the Jewish arch-enemy. Jews and Samaritans hated each other, but Jesus, in his grace, talks with a Samaritan woman of questionable character... something a "good" rabbi would never do. And we discovered the first two essential qualities of "Jesus Evangelism." Remember? Availability and Acceptance. Jesus made himself available to this woman—a spiritual and moral enemy of his people—and he accepted her just the way she was. She didn't have to clean up her act before she came to him. He welcomed her in her brokenness.

How else can you describe that but Grace! Pure grace. If Jesus hadn't met that woman in grace, she would have rushed off in humiliation. But he graciously came to her turf and accepted her right as she was. But he didn't leave her where she was! What kindness would that be, to find someone living a life of brokenness and shame and just leave her there? The only way forward—the only way for her to experience the life she was created to live—was through truth! Ask anyone from Celebrate Recovery. If you won't face the truth about yourself, you will never get better.

Real grace always lead to truth, but how often do we try to make that transition with disastrous consequences? We dare to speak truth into someone's life, and it blows up in our face. I remember telling someone that I thought he had a drinking problem. It was the truth, but it was also the end of our relationship. So how do we move from grace to truth? Let's watch the master at work. And I would urge you to jot down some notes as we go. These are worth remembering.

What does he do first? He asks for help. "Could I have a cup of water?" A Jew never drank from a Samaritan cup; it was unclean! But Jesus started their conversation by needing something from her. Want to move a casual relationship toward one that is open to a deeper conversation? Ask for help. "You are a great golfer; could you meet me on the range and give me some tips?" "Could you give me that recipe?" "You've raised some great kids. Would you mind giving me pointers on good parenting?" If we tromp into conversations as if they are entirely one-sided... like we have great spiritual wisdom to offer and they are fortunate to receive it. Well, some folks just might find that attitude a little patronizing. But when we say, "I need your help," it dignifies and honors them. Not a bad way to take a relationship deeper.

Then, he teased her into a deeper spiritual conversation. He didn't lead with, "I am the savior of the world and you need my help!" No, he took an ordinary conversation about water and used that to transition into a conversation about spiritual things. "I'm thirsty and you are giving me water, but if you asked me I could give you such a drink that you would never be parched again." See? Find a point of common interest and tap into it; let the conversation gently meander toward deeper things.

Your colleague at work says, "I just hate my mother-in-law. She is always undercutting me." You reply, "I remember having those same feelings. I cannot tell you how many sleepless nights I endured until I discovered the power of forgiveness." Do you think the conversation will end there? No! No slamming them with the Bible. You just tease your way in the direction of spiritual things. Timing.

So after Jesus asked for help—after he teased the conversation in a spiritual direction—he helped her face the elephant in her spiritual bedroom. [Read 16-19] Now we come to the crux of the matter. This woman has a shady sexual past, and as anyone who has ever struggled with sexual temptation knows, nothing can lead you into a place of shame and self-loathing faster than sexual sin.

But, again, notice the timing. Jesus didn't lead with this. Everyone else did! That's why she came to the well alone. She was tired of the constant derision from religious people. If Jesus had led with his prophetic insight into her sexual past, she would have run from him as she was running from the rest of society. But he led with grace. He established a relationship with her. He asked for her help. And by his questions, he communicated that he cared for her as a human being. When people know that we really love them they are far more open to deeper conversations. Timing!

And notice this: Jesus never said, "You are an adulteress! You are a sinner!" He didn't need to. In a gentle and clever way, "Hey, why don't you invite your husband to come and join this conversation," he turned the spotlight of truth on the shadows in which she had been living for years. Think we could learn from

that? Touch pain gently. "So, the only way you can sleep is with 5 glasses of wine? Anything about that concern you?" "So, you are in a relationship with another guy who treats you like dirt. What does that tell you?" "So, you missed another one of your kid's games. How is that relationship, anyhow?" Timely truth casts a light on sin that is healing, not humiliating.

Then comes one of the most awesome dodges you will find in scripture. See if you agree. [Read 19-26] Do you see what I mean? Jesus raises "the" issue, and she doesn't want to go there. She wants to avoid it. Imagine someone using avoidance as a coping mechanism! So what topic does she change to? Religion! She goes holy on him! "Ah, I see that we are headed toward the 'religion' conversation. Well, you have your temple and we ours; you have your spiritual practices and we have ours. We may worship in different ways, but at least we are worshipping, right? And in the end, all these paths lead to the same God, right?"

This conversation happened nearly 2000 years ago, and yet, it could have taken place yesterday in Starbucks. This is the battle cry of modern day relativism. Relativism is the dominant philosophy of our culture that says, "Concepts such as right and wrong, good and bad, are not absolutes; they change from culture to culture and situation to situation. There is no such thing as a moral absolute." Of course, the minute someone says that, they are making an absolute truth claim—that there is no such thing as absolute truth—and that is logically incoherent... but that is another conversation.

This woman dodges the painful conversation about her sexual past by jumping into a philosophical discussion: "Your truth is your truth. My truth is my truth. Faith is what matters. Whatever the object of your faith, as long as you have faith in something... that's what counts! Right?"

Have any of you ever run into that dodge? The conversation heads toward religion and the way out is to say, "Well, I can see that Christianity works for you, but I have my own set of beliefs. At least I believe something, right?" How does Jesus respond? "Belief only helps if what you believe is true. Yes, I'm sure you sincerely believe what you believe. But you are sincerely wrong!" That is a hard thing to say and a hard thing to hear, but the claim that all religions are essentially the same is ignorant; it just isn't true. After the first of the year, I am going to preach a sermon on Islam, and I will show seven ways that Allah and Yahweh are different. Not to be judgmental... just to be clear. Only Christianity offers salvation by grace, not works; only Christianity offers a suffering God who enters our suffering. Part of good timing is knowing when and how to say, "Well, actually, all religions aren't the same. Let me share a few differences."

Of course, the point of this message is, the gracious Jesus found a way to speak truth into this woman's life—truth about her struggle with sin, truth about the differences in their religions—but he spoke this truth with such grace and

impeccable timing that, in the end, she was ready to drink from the living water that only Jesus could offer.

I want to close my message by having you listen to another woman's story... a woman right from within our own church family. You would swear that you were listening to the story of the Samaritan woman, and when it is done, you will realize that Jesus is still—2,000 years later—speaking grace and truth into the lives of his beloved, broken people. [Janis Gray testimony]

What a powerful, gutsy testimony. But there was one little sentence that just jumped out at me; I wonder if you noticed it. When she described being at that birthday party, Janice said, "I was exceptionally thirsty that day." Did you hear that? Doesn't it sound like she was sitting at that Samaritan well? Exceptionally thirsty... and listening to the grace and truth that flowed from the only one who could satisfy that exceptional thirst. He still can. This is a grace and truth message that is still changing lives 2,000 years later. Who do you know that needs both the grace and truth of Jesus?

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. John 1:14 describes Jesus as representing "grace and truth." The story of the woman at the well is a demonstration of both. With which does Jesus lead? Where is the transition from one to the other?
2. There is one point where the woman clearly dodges Jesus' question. Can you find it? How is that same issue used by people today to keep the claims of Christ at arm's length?
3. Pastor Mark named several qualities of "Jesus-style evangelism." Can you name them? Which is most comfortable for you? Which gives you the greatest difficulty? What one thing are you willing to do to put this story into action in your own life?