

True Worship

Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:5-30

Introduction

We are all currently experiencing something totally new and even distressing. Much of the world—particularly us in Toronto—are in “domestic isolation” right now due to the outbreak of a new virus that has hit all parts of the globe.

We lift up prayers for all who may be affected by illness. We especially pray for those essential workers who don't have the luxury of keeping at a safe distance and risk exposure every day. We also pray for one another as members of St. Mark's Church. We join in spirit as God's children and hold up our brothers and sisters in Christ during this period of uncertainty and insecurity.

Because of this lockdown that's in place it has affected the life of the church in all its forms—fellowship, activities, meetings, gatherings and of course, worship. All churches as well as most businesses are shut down and people have had to become home-bound.

When the central focus of congregational life has always been the weekly gathering for worship church folks have been left to find alternative ways and approaches to continue some form or corporate worship. Depending on the size, shape, character and culture of each church there have been several ways in which services have continued.

In essence churches and church leaders have had to quickly redefine what it means to be “church.” Connected to this idea is the question of what “worship” itself means.

Overcoming Barriers

Today's message is an adaptation from last Sunday's service. We held worship although a number of folks were absent. With much attention on how to do worship these next few weeks it seemed fitting to revisit Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman on what true worship means.

Jesus' encounter at the well with the Samaritan woman is story rich in challenge of norms and conventions. It raises profound questions of what were the normal expectations and understandings of one another and the world shaped by culture, race, gender, social relationship, religions, faith and worship, just to name a few.

We've heard so much about "social distance" these past few weeks. We are cautioned about maintaining a certain physical proximity from one another for health and safety reasons. Social distancing is a *temporary practice* for the time being to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. It serves to accomplish two things: mutually protects people, while still allowing and including engagement/interaction/conversation. In a way it can be seen as a positive, constructive thing.

But it could be seen as a negative thing—to exclude, keep people away emotionally, psychologically. It can become a tool of personal power to dictate who is included and who's excluded.

Let's consider "spiritual distancing." It's a similar thing but is *spiritually* determined. The Samaritan woman was distanced—physically, socially, culturally, geographically, religiously and yes, spiritually. This distancing wasn't for any positive purpose. Rather, it was to categorize, exclude, diminish, shame, pass judgement. And unlike the temporary nature of our social distancing, the distancing for her was permanent.

The Jews had such animosity for the Samaritans and considered them as their enemies. Jews even refused to even walk through Samaria. Devout Jews—dictated by *prejudice*—would go out of their way and cross the Jordan River and then travel north where they would then cross the Jordan River again to enter Galilee.

Jesus would have none of this. He crosses a border, enters enemy territory ... and starts talking to a woman.

The group U2 has a song, "*Where the Streets Have No Name.*" The background story to this is that in Belfast one can tell a person's income and religion just from their street name.

*I want to run, I want to hide
I want to tear down the walls, that hold me inside
I want to reach out, and touch the flame
Where the streets have no name*

Jesus wants us to "tear down the walls that hold us inside." These walls hold us inside ourselves—we are held by fear, prejudice, hatred, bitterness, self-superiority, pride, misunderstanding and fear. And it's so true: The walls we build are all inside of us, in our hearts. They prevent us from treating people like people.

Like Jesus, we should have none of this. He wants us to commit to this same attitude.

Jesus' Challenge

And then Jesus does the unthinkable—He speaks to her. He actually speaks to her. In doing so Jesus defies social convention and breaks barriers in two ways: first, he speaks to an unknown woman; and second, he talks to a Samaritan. Both actions were forbidden for Jewish men and was subject to punishment.

Simply put, here we see Jesus talking to an unknown woman of an enemy people. The Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day would not even teach women. And yet here is Jesus reaching out to a Samaritan woman.

To make matters worse she was perceived by her own people as an immoral person, someone who must not be associated with even while gathering water. While it would be the usual practice to get water early in the morning while it was still cool this woman came to the well at high noon when no one would be there. She was shunned even by her own people.

Are you starting to get the picture? This woman was an outcast among outcasts! If there was anyone on the face of planet earth that Jesus should not have associated with, it was this woman.

But he quite boldly defied Religious and Cultural distancing as it was used to belittle her, judge her, deny her of her humanity. His act of Love—this bridging the distance—was quite *scandalous*. This usual distancing she faced wasn't for any constructive or positive purpose.

"Give me a drink." Jesus is asking her to fill a need of his. In certain cultures, if a person *asks* another for something, this shows a subordination, submission; it can also reflect closeness and connection.

In any case, Jesus' request is very surprising and unexpected, which is why she answers, *"How is it that you, a Jew, asks a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?"* Initially, it seems like she doesn't get it. When Jesus says, *"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."*

She responds, *"How are you going to get this water? This well is deep and you have no bucket."* She's still thinking about well water. Jesus then tells her that whoever receives the water he has to give will spring up to eternal life—this water is the gift of eternal life!

But she still doesn't really get it; she still associates the water Jesus is talking about with water that you can get from a well. Finally she says to him: *"Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."*

True Worship

Perhaps for the first time in this woman's life she is experiencing empowerment. By Jesus' act of connecting with her, bridging the distance both physical and spiritual, she gets a first taste of the experience of God's love and acceptance. This is the living water, the true gift of life.

The Samaritan woman understood both her life and the practice of worship in terms of *physical distance*—between her and others, and the restricted area of Mt. Gerizim where Samaritans were permitted to worship God. Only Jews were allowed to properly worship God in Jerusalem.

But Jesus overturns this understanding of worship. He overturns the entire idea of the character and location of worship of God. He redefines the very essence of worship itself. He tells her in v. 21 that right worship of God happens neither on Mt. Gerizim nor in Jerusalem. Worship is not determined by location or who you are. Rather, when people break down the artificial barriers between them, when they stop holding each other in (false) judgment, and when they begin to affirm their common humanity, then and only then will *true* worship be experienced: *"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him"* (v. 23). Only this kind of worship is *spiritual* worship—determined by the condition of our hearts to love and welcome one another as God's child and not by restrictions of identity, class, requirement or location.

True worship then invites us to participate fully as God's people in joining together in every way possible to reflect the reconciling character and will of God. Jesus's words to the Samaritan woman are quite fitting for us during this time social distancing and isolation when it comes to worship—the location and physical form of worship is not as important as *that* we worship, and that we do so with all the love, compassion and desire to connect with one another in the name and manner of Christ.

We don't know at this point how long we'll be in lockdown. But as long as it takes, we know that worship does not and will not stop. So let us go forward in our spiritual walk, exercising the fruit of the Spirit, loving and supporting our neighbour (at least in modified ways) and worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

As this social distancing continues it requires many things to be cancelled—gatherings with people, travel, events, and so on. It's a different way and pace of life for now.

But as Christians there are many things are not cancelled, and will never be cancelled.

This has been going around in Pastors' circles:

Conversations has not been cancelled.

Reading has not been cancelled.

Music has not been cancelled.

Laughing has not been cancelled.

Relationship has not been cancelled.

Kindness has not been cancelled.

Prayer has not been cancelled.

Worship as a way of life has not been cancelled.

Hope has not been cancelled.

Love has not been cancelled.

Let's embrace what we have.