

“Giving Up Superiority”

March 19, 2017

Giving It Up series – Third Sunday in Lent

Let’s get it out there. Jesus has every reason - at least by the standards of his day - to feel superior to this woman at the well. He is a Jew; she is a Samaritan, which means that she is of mixed heritage. A male had more power anywhere than any woman, which gives him “one up” on her.

Jesus certainly doesn’t have the same relationship baggage that she has. We gather that she’s got quite a reputation. It might seem like a small detail, but the time of day matters here. She comes to the well at noon - in the hot sun - the hottest time of day - because no one else will be there, and she won’t have to deal with the looks and whispers and gossip. She’s dealing with people feeling superior and looking down on her every day. At noon, when it’s deserted, she can just get the water and go!

She’ll carry the water back to her home in the heat, but it’s better than being around the other women who mock her because she’s been married many times. According to her culture, she’s got nothing to show for her life. She’s an outsider among other Samaritans, too.

John tells us outright that Jews and Samaritans didn’t have anything to do with each other. One thing they didn’t agree on was where they were supposed to worship God. Even the fact that Jesus is going from Judea through Samaria to get to Galilee was a cultural no-no. Samaria is sandwiched in-between Judea to the south and Galilee to the north, yet most Jews would bypass Samaria and double their time to avoid going through it. They didn’t want to set foot there. And I know there are places we avoid going or places where we don’t want to drive for fear of many things – whether the fear is legitimate or not.

What’s more, Jewish men weren’t supposed to talk to women in public, especially women they didn’t know. So this woman represents a double whammy for Jesus—she’s a woman and a Samaritan. She’s both an outcast and an enemy in Jewish culture. Jesus shouldn’t be anywhere near her, but he is. He shouldn’t talk to her, but he does.

We see how improper and unexpected it is when Jesus asks her for a drink: “You’re a Jew. I’m a Samaritan. Why are you asking me for a drink of water?” She knows that by Jesus asking her for a drink, he risks making himself “unclean” according to Jewish culture.

The four words that Jesus speaks to her, “Give me a drink,” are shocking. Sharing a cup was an intimate thing to do—it still is for us. Do you share a glass with others? I’ll

confess that I really don't like it. I've done it, but I get pretty grossed out by floaties. I don't really like sharing a cup with my family. Can you imagine a stranger asking you for a drink from your cup? What would you say?

Let's be honest: we struggle with superiority. The opportunity for us to feel superior to someone else is always there beckoning us to bite and hang on so that we can feel better about ourselves. Maybe you've noticed it when you compare yourself to someone else: your marriage or relationship, your job, your family, your income, your education, your political views, and even your faith journey.

I thought about superiority this week. First, how many of you have filled out brackets for the NCAA tournament? How many of you are hoping that your team wins - that you can be that person who takes it all? Who wants to walk around with the satisfaction of knowing that your team is the best - and win the pot? I know it may not be on the same level, but there are glimpses of the struggle for superiority even at March Madness.

The second area of my life where superiority came into play - it's Pinewood Derby season. My son, Luka, and fellow Scouts have been working on cars this winter with the ultimate goal of "fastest car." I saw kids (and parents!) excited about winning and kids upset about not being the fastest. But what I also saw was kids encouraging each other - high-fiving when their car did well, saying "good job!" and simply having fun, and happy for their friends. Their witness was meaningful.

We like to think we avoid being pulled into feeling superior, but we don't. Maybe it's easier for us to admit when we feel inferior to others. We can point to the places when we feel like we don't measure up or where we feel "less than." But we're not so quick to claim those places when we feel "better than" or on higher moral, ethical, or spiritual ground.

It's easy to see that Jesus has the upper hand here. But he doesn't use his power to strong arm this woman. He really does meet her where she is - even though it's a major risk for him to take - and finds a way to help her realize that she has something to offer. He asks for a drink of water - and remember, this is a man who has already turned water into wine!

It's not just about who he is and what he can do for her. She is important to him and to God. He is physically thirsty, and she can meet his need for water. She is spiritually thirsty, and he can give her living water.

That phrase "living water" makes me think of an opposite image - a pail that sat under our downspout to catch the run-off from the roof. That rainwater would sit there and turn all kinds of shades of green. We used it to water our flowerbeds, but it wasn't fit to drink.

But living water is different – clear, refreshing, ready to use. Jesus offers the image of a spring that sustains us. And living water is something we don't keep to ourselves, but something that we share so that others might know its power. Living water shows itself in the assurance of God's love for us no matter where we've been or where we are. It will sustain us as we walk with God into the future. And it's not just for us alone – but for all.

This woman is open to receive Jesus for who he is, even as religious leaders begin to question him and feel threatened by him. This woman is waiting for the Messiah to come - and I imagine that the promise of someone to bring redemption is welcome in the midst of her life. She's humble and able to hear Jesus - and quick to respond!

We see mutual gain here. Jesus gives up superiority in breaking the social conventions that would've kept him from getting a drink and engaging in conversation. The woman is open and willing to listen even to one whom she might write off. "You're a Jew. I'm a Samaritan woman." And she receives God's grace in a powerful way!

It's worth noting that she leaves her water jar, goes back home, and tells people what happened. She could've kept it to herself. She could've decided that she wasn't going to share this good news with people who had been so mean and cruel to her. She could've taken the bait of feeling superior to others and chewed on it for the rest of her life.

She could've, but then her life would really be transformed by God's grace. She becomes an effective witness to who Jesus is and what he can do, and Jesus reaches more people because of her. Lives are changed because both Jesus and this woman give up feeling superior.

I invite you to see and hear how this woman might have responded. This is spoken word – poetry that is spoken fairly quickly, but full of meaning. SHOW **Spoken Word**

"To be known is to be loved...to be loved is to be known..." This woman was transformed because Jesus saw her as beloved, and she saw herself in a new way. The grace he offers is amazing and unmatched.

What's to be gained from giving up superiority? When it becomes less about how great we are? Perhaps it's humility - and a sense of perspective on how good God is.

This encounter reminds us that Jesus will break every boundary that we create to reach people. Ultimately, God's love is unlimited even as we seek to hold it back from people because of whatever label or issue we choose to hold onto.

But I wonder what it means for our witness to give up superiority. I believe that people feel welcome when they come into this church. But will we **go into** all the world

as the Body of Christ instead of waiting for the world to **come into** the church building? We share our faith outside of this space at the store, school, playground, exercise class, wherever we are. It doesn't have to be a place where we're comfortable, but a place where others might be more comfortable talking about faith and God.

Yes, it would be great if everyone felt welcome and invited to church, but they don't. It's not enough for us to love others when they come here. We face a world where plenty of people feel like they'd have to come at a different time rather than Sunday morning because someone would wonder or glance disapprovingly or gossip about them. So will we create safe space – wherever we are – whether in the church or outside of it - where people can sense God's love in a new way?

Will we see gifts in them and not assume that we're the only ones who have something to give, but that we'll receive something from them and learn more about God because of them? Compassion means to suffer with others, and we make it less than what it's intended to be if we're only thinking about what we can do on our end. We're in this together, and God teaches us through relationships that we build with each other.

It's not up to us to figure out who's in or who's out of God's circle. We just need to draw it wider, and let God work. We're not called to be the ones who make God's calls on others' lives. Instead, we'd do well to look at the barriers we've constructed and work to break them down – whether it's about race, class, nationality, gender, sexuality, social status, or any other barrier that we put up when it comes to God's love. God's grace is not something that we disperse. It's not ours to give and was never ours to give. It's a gift we've been given; it's ours to share, celebrate, and give thanks for.

May God help us to give up superiority and instead focus on God's goodness and grace. Thanks be to God! AMEN.