

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

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(Guest Preacher for The Reverend Gail Miller, Pastor)

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Third Sunday in Lent

John 4:1-29, 39-42

## Giving Up Superiority

The day is hot and dry. Red dust swirls in the air giving everything a reddish brown tint. The heat of the noonday sun and shimmering heat haze reminds Jesus and his followers of their thirst. Jacob's well comes into sight and Jesus gratefully takes a seat on the edge of the well while his disciples go into the city to buy food.

The disciples go into a Samaritan city for food. How odd. Jews don't risk Samaritan fare. Jesus is on his way to Galilee. He could have gone the long way around Samaria, most Jews did to avoid encounters with such inferior beings. Jesus, being Jesus, walks through the middle of potentially hostile territory.

As he rests, a woman of Samaria approaches. How odd. What could send her to the well in this heat? A Jew sits at the well. She braces for the dissing she's sure will come.

Oh, how we love to feel superior to that woman. We've dissed her for centuries. Her behavior, lewd and wanton, disgraceful, disgusting, disreputable, despicable. We dismiss her without getting to know her. She's invisible.

There's an accent that when I have heard it I immediately thought redneck, uneducated, grossly prejudiced. I don't even have to see the person, just hear the accent. The person is invisible. I know nothing about the person, just the accent and I make a judgmental, dismissive decision. Have you ever done that? Dismissed a person as inferior? Without seeing?

I suppose one way of feeling good about ourselves is to put another down. Have you heard the one about... and the joke cuts or denigrates a person or group. We laugh and feel superior. At least I am not like **that** person. Oh, wait Jesus told a story about a self satisfied Pharisee who looked down his long nose at a tax collector praying in agony. "Thank you, Lord, that I am not like **that** man." And which one went away justified in the Lord?

Family feuds and feuds between nations usually begin with name calling. Do you know what my sister (or China, or Presidential candidate, put in as name) did yesterday! It's not a question, it's a call to arms. We start denigrating nations we don't like. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor we denigrated all Japanese, even incarcerating Americans of Japanese descent.

Generals quickly put a stop to the Christmas miracles in the European trenches. It's hard to shoot a person whose family we can picture, a young man with a sweetheart, parents who love him. A person rather like me. We need to make the other Other, different, beneath us. We need to feel superior in our being, in our way of life, in our cause.

Think of the names established folks give each wave of incoming immigrants--from Ireland, Italy, China, Mexico, Syria. We are so superior to each wave of immigrants. Each wave is going to steal our jobs, change the American way of life. Our superiority renders the Other invisible, unknown except for fear.

One of the difficulties of being king or queen of the mountain is the fear that there is someone else who wants that spot. There's also more than a touch of hubris. It's not the healthy pride that says good job, well done. It's a pride that says I am better than anyone else. It's a pride that puts a barrier between king of the mountain and King of the Universe whom we invite to sit upon the throne of our hearts. Denizens

of the upper reaches of the mountain have to be constantly vigilant, fearing for their status and privilege. Could this be part of the anger so many feel these days? Is it anger and fear at losing their superiority, privilege, and status to people who are so obviously inferior?

What might happen if we give up feelings of superiority? Or give up our feelings of inferiority which may drive us to diss others. Either way the attitude gets in the way of meaningful relationships, especially our relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

Let's take a closer look at the woman who encountered Jesus at the well. Who is she? Let's see her as Jesus did. The woman is apprehensive about this Jew at the well. Jews denigrated, dissed Samaritans. Jesus thought otherwise about Samaritans. He lifted up a Samaritan merchant as an example not only of who is our neighbor, but how to be a neighbor.

Jesus engages her as a fellow human being, equal to him. She has a way of extracting water from the well and he does not. He engages her with an obvious request. "Give me a drink." She's startled. He does not denigrate her because she is a woman, an attitude she is certainly used to. Goodness knows this still happens today. Jesus does not denigrate her because she is a Samaritan. What group do you like to poke at?

She is startled because he has not done the judgmental bit she is accustomed to. He addresses her as a person of value. How would our daily conversations change if each time we address another person we do so implicitly acknowledging a worthwhile human being, a person who is a child of God, beloved by God just as you are.

The woman has spunk. She's wary of this stranger, and it shows in her response. John loves to use a literary device of confusion and misunderstanding to lead the people in his stories and us to greater understanding. We saw it in the story of Nicodemus, again here. Word play goes back and forth. The woman becomes increasingly comfortable and confident. So much so that she, a woman, engages Jesus in a theological discussion! Only Mary, Martha's sister, and this woman of Samaria do that. This is a woman of curiosity and intellect.

Then Jesus asks her to bring her husband. It was unseemly for the two to be conversing like this without her husband or perhaps a brother present. Do you notice that she is so comfortable with Jesus she will not lie or prevaricate? That happens when we give up pretenses of superiority and grow into Jesus. We have to be who we truly are with and in Jesus.

"I have no husband," she declares. Jesus reminds her she has had five husbands and is not married to the man she currently lives with. Herein lies the seed of the scandal of our dissing this honorable woman. Look again. She was married five times. She was not running around sleeping with any man who came her way. She is such a valuable person, worthy woman that five men wanted to marry her. Maybe it was partly the Levirate marriage where she takes to husband brothers of hubby number one. Maybe not. Life was precarious. Perhaps her first husband died in one of the frequent disease plagues, number two was kicked by a mule while plowing, number three was attacked by robbers on his way back from market, you get the picture. The truth is, she is a valuable woman, a worthy woman, a beloved woman.

She has gone from being wary of Jesus the Jew, to talking with him as a prophet who can answer deep questions, to seeing him as the Messiah. She puts down her jar and runs into the city, crying "I have met a man. Could he be the Messiah!" It sounds rhetorical. She is convinced Jesus is the Messiah. She has met him.

She runs in the heat, her face red with exertion, her chest heaves as she gasps and gulps for air. Her neighbors run out to her, alarmed at her appearance and curious about her impassioned declarations. She details her encounter with Jesus and invites them to come and see. They go and see. On her word they believe and go and see. No one is superior or inferior, no judgments. They take her word and invitation. They go and see.

Why does she go to the well at noon? She is an old woman. She's had five husbands before her current beau. Let's say she married at 19 and her marriages averaged 10 years. That makes her at least 69. Why get married again? Been there done that. What they need now is companionship, a loving relationship in

their final years. She also has a slew of granddaughters who would go to the well for her, saving her old legs and back the trip.

For some reason the granddaughter did not bring water for them that morning. She has run out and needs more for the noon and evening meals, plus washing. Necessity, not shame, sends her to the well at noon. Or maybe, the Lord who provides for our needs sent her to the well because she needed to meet Jesus. How does God send you to the well to encounter Jesus?

The citizens of Sychar, which we know from Genesis as Shechem, are so taken with Jesus they invite him to stay. "We believed at first because of your word," they tell the woman, "Now, because we know him, we believe that he is the Savior of the world." A profound testimony.

What would it take to follow Jesus' example and treat everyone as he did, with honesty, dignity, regarding each as a child of God.

Why did the woman go to the well at noon? Maybe the God who provides for our needs directed her to the well so she could meet Jesus and be convinced of his identity as Savior of the World. Through her, her friends and neighbors become convinced. And we have an opportunity to take another look at ourselves and how we view others.

It's been a long time since I've heard that accent. I pray, Oh Lord, I pray I would now look to see the accent as a real, whole person perhaps worth knowing and not as a collection of dismissive, judgmental prejudices.