We are in the book of John, and last week we began our work on the fourth chapter which features a conversation between Jesus and a woman of Samaria. Once again, then, let us stand and read together John 4:5-15.

5 So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob’s well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. 7 A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” 8 (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, “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.” 11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” 13 Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” 15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.”

My message this morning is entitled, “How to Minister in Samaria”, and it falls under four subheadings: 1) Breaking Through Prejudice in Samaria; 2) Appreciating the Irony; 3) The Samaritan Approach; and 4) The Gift of God.

I. Breaking Through Prejudice in Samaria

Let’s pick up the story as we John records it, beginning with vs. 5, “So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was
there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said, ‘Give me a drink.’ (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)” Let’s take a moment for a few observations.

First, the location of our story is the city of Sychar in the region of Samaria (show map: http://www.jesuswalk.com/john/maps/jerusalem-cana-samaria-2148x3472x300.jpg). NT scholar William Barclay writes that “Just short of Sychar the road to Samaria forks. The one branch goes north-east to Scythopolis; the other goes west to Nablus and then north to Engannim. At the fork of the road there stands to this day the well known as Jacob’s well.” Once again, please note: the Bible is not myth and legend. This story took place in history with very real people in a location that can still be identified to this day. Here’s a picture of what Jacob’s well currently looks like (show pic: https://inahotandthinplace.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/jacobs-well-0571.jpg). According to the NT scholars, the well was likely 100 ft. deep in the first century, which was a VERY deep well for that time.

Let us also observe that, according to vs. 8, Jesus is unaccompanied by his disciples, for they had gone into a nearby town to purchase food. I want you to think about that. As we observed last week, truly pious Jews would have avoided Samaria altogether and walked an extra day or two on the Jordan River Route due to the 400-year-old conflict between Jews and Samaritans. Such is why, when Jesus announces that He intends to walk straight through Samaria, we should assume his disciples were likely shocked and fairly concerned. However, we now observe that the disciples are buying food from the dreaded Samaritans. To eat the food of the Samaritans was equated with eating the flesh of swine, according to the Jewish Rabbis. If Jews did trek through Samaria, it was assumed that they would pack in their own food. Yet in ordering his disciples to purchase Samaritan food, Jesus is clearly teaching His disciples to set aside their prejudice and to look upon the Samaritans with new eyes and an open heart.

Church, don’t miss these little details. It is one thing to say that you love “the Samaritans” in your life; it is quite another thing to eat their food and do business with them. If we are going to truly demonstrate the love of Jesus in our “Samaria,”…in that place where people assume we hate them…we must heed the example of Jesus and His disciples. We would do well to engage them in business, eat their food, listen to their stories, and in so doing establish relationships.

I don’t know what your “Samaria” looks like, but one expression of “Samaria” for me has been engagement with Muslims. I don’t have much experience with Muslims; there is traditionally a tension between Christians and Muslims; and I am a Christian pastor, so that increases my
perception of the tension. Nevertheless, God has placed a burden upon my heart to walk into that tension…it is my metaphorical call to “Samaria.”

So a few months ago my wife’s 15 year-old minivan was assaulted by a large deer! That led me on a quest to find her a “newer” minivan, and my quest eventually led to me to a small, used car dealership run by Iranian Muslims just down the street from our SKC campus. Not only did I get excellent service and a great deal on a newer van, but they also helped repair our old van at cost so that we could donate the van to a family in need. Over the course of several weeks, I developed an authentic friendship with Massoud (the sales person) and Mohammed (the owner and chief mechanic), and even this past week I called my Iranian friends to express my love for them and their families who remain in Iran, particularly given the recent threat of war with America. By virtue of doing business together, as we collaborated and spent time together, we found time to have a very stimulating conversation about God and our faith, and I am grateful to call these men my friends. I think this is what Jesus is now teaching His disciples…the walls of mistrust are often broken down and relationships can be established as we engage in business, eat together, and share our stories. Let us make just a few more observations and then we’ll jump back into the story.

John records that in was the sixth hour, which would have been noon, when a Samaritan woman comes to draw water from Jacob’s well. Many scholars note that Jacob’s well was not at all convenient to any town that this woman was coming from. In other words, Jacob’s well was on a rural piece of property. The nearest town was well over ½ mile away, and there were local wells to draw from in the surrounding towns. So why does this woman make the trek all the way out to Jacob’s well? Hold on to that thought. We must also observe that this is a particularly unusual time for a woman to come to the well. I have had the honor of travelling to very remote, primitive areas in this world where women continue to draw water each day from the local well. It has been my observation that the women gather around the well early in the morning in great numbers, and then again in the evening (though in smaller numbers). It is rare to find women coming to the well in the heat of the day. So here in our story we have a woman who has walked a great distance to draw water from this remote well, and she has come in the heat of the day when few if any other people would be joining her there. Now…why is that? We don’t know for sure. We will learn later that this woman has had five husbands and is currently living with a man who is not her husband. Many NT scholars have assumed that this woman was an adulteress, or at least stigmatized due to her many marriages and her live-in boyfriend. They theorize that this woman has come to this distant well during this brutal hour to avoid the condemning stares and snide remarks from the other women in her village. That may be the case; we cannot know for certain, but her appearance here at Jacob’s well at high noon certainly seems unusual.
As we noted last week, it would have been culturally normal and assumed that Jesus and this woman of Samaria would not interact in any way whatsoever. As John writes to his Greek listeners, “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.” Furthermore, Jewish rabbis were strictly forbidden to speak with women in public…even their own wives…not to mention somebody else’s wife or girlfriend! The reason? To protect the reputation of the rabbi against any perception of scandal. So, if a Rabbi wanted to speak to a woman, what would he do to protect his reputation? He would discreetly visit the woman privately at night. Yet we read in vs. 7 that Jesus, seeing the woman of Samaria, speaks to her, saying, “Give me a drink.” So…let us now move to my second subheading:

II. Appreciating the Irony

Can you see the irony here? Nicodemus, the famous and highly respected Pharisee we read about in John 3, the great teacher of Israel, came to speak with Jesus privately at night in order to protect his reputation. In his eyes, speaking to Jesus was as much of a risk to his reputation as talking to a woman in public.

Jesus, on the other hand, who is THE GREAT TEACHER of Israel and the very Son of Man, engages with a Samaritan woman of questionable character in broad daylight, giving no thought to His own reputation whatsoever.

Whereas Nicodemus represented the very best, most highly regarded Jewish man of unblemished virtue and pristine reputation, this lady at the well represents the antithesis: she is a Samaritan woman, and a woman who has been married to five husbands and now lives with a man outside of marriage. She has no reputation left to protect.

In two chapters we are meeting the two extremes: the very best in the eyes of the culture, and the very worst in the eyes of the culture. We have already observed how Jesus told the very best, righteous Pharisee that he must be born again…that all of his religiosity would not gain him entrance into the Kingdom of God. Rather, the esteemed leader would have to humble himself, acknowledging his snake-bit condition, and then look to the Son of Man in faith, just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert so that all that were bitten could gaze upon the bronze serpent and be healed …remember that? No doubt that conversation had a very humbling effect upon
Nicodemus as we will see later in the gospel, but now let us look to how Jesus will speak to the Samaritan woman. Will He use the same approach? Will He inform the Samaritan woman that she must be born again? Or will He tailor his approach for Samaria?

III. The Samaritan Approach

There can be no doubt that Jesus initiates this conversation with the Samaritan woman out of love. Though Jesus is no doubt thirsty for a drink of water from the well, He discerns a woman who has a much deeper thirst. She is clearly unhappy and struggling with her life. She is alone in every sense of the word. As was always the case in the ancient world, her identity is constantly defined by men…first by her father, then by those who she was once married to, and now she is known as the mistress of the man she lives with. No one knows or even cares about what is going on in her heart. Her life consists of the labels that she wears: she is a daughter, she is the property of Mr. __________, she is a widow or a divorcée several times over, she is scandal, a “harlot,” an adulteress. This woman, dripping with sweat under the middle-eastern sun, has been called a great many things; but at least she has never been called a “Jew!” Speaking of which…there is now before her a Jewish man. He is seated on the ground beside the well. He, too, is sweating and weary-looking.

“What does he want?” she thinks to herself. “He is a man…no doubt he wants what every man wants.” I think it’s fair to assume this woman had no high opinion of men in general…not to mention those Jewish men who were too high and mighty to speak with her in the daylight but would surely seek her out in the night.

She sets about the business of lowering her pouch made of animal skin into the deep well, fully committed to act as though the Jew was not even there, when suddenly the Jewish man speaks to her: “Give me a drink.”

His voice is kind; the request is not condescending. The man is clearly weary and thirsty; He is asking for a favor, and He has asked politely. Nevertheless, years of being treated as a second-class citizen by these Jews passing through Samaria has left the woman jaded, even combative. So she snaps back, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?”

Let’s pause here for a minute.
Did you notice the approach Jesus uses in Samaria? It is completely different from that in Jerusalem with Nicodemus. As we can see, the Samaritan is primed and ready for conflict. Conflict is the native language in Samaria due to hundreds of years of animosity. So rather than telling the Samaritan woman that she must be born again as He did with Nicodemus, Jesus asks her for a favor. By asking He is willingly placing Himself in her debt. He is making himself vulnerable, even dependent upon her service to Him. He is elevating her to a position of power over Him! She has the means to draw water; He does not. She now has all the power…a position she is clearly unaccustomed to occupying. Church…don’t miss this: the Samaritan approach is ask for help!

This moment in Samaria reminds me of that famous scene in The Hunt for Red October, when Jack Ryan (played by Alec Baldwin) tries do diffuse a stand off between the US Naval Captain and the renegade Russian Admiral played by Sean Connery. The Americans and the Russians have their guns out because conflict is the native tongue between these two countries. There is no history of trust; only hostility. But right at the moment when the tension is about to explode, Jack Ryan asks the Russian Lieutenant for a cigarette and a light, even though he clearly doesn’t smoke! After taking a long drag, the Russian Admiral comments that the American is turning green, and everyone starts laughing, and the peace talks begin!

Sometimes when we are in Samaria, in that place where conflict is the native tongue, the best way to break the ice is to humble ourselves and ask for help. Ask for the Samaritan’s expertise. Ask for a drink of water…ask. Because in asking, we elevate another person into a safe position where they can choose how to proceed. By asking we place ourselves at their mercy; we give them the benefit of the doubt. When Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink, He is literally transgressing multiple taboos of his culture: He is engaging a Samaritan; He is speaking to an unwed woman in public who likely has a less-than-sparkling reputation in town; and He is intending to drink water from a Samaritan’s cup…all of which would render Him unclean in the context of first century Jewish norms. None of this is lost on the Samaritan woman…so we must imagine that her response is literally one of shock: “How is that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” She is literally asking, “What’s up with that? I don’t get it? Who are you? This is not normal. Why would you break every cultural taboo, risk your precious reputation, and even render yourself unclean by asking to drink from my cup?”

This now provides the perfect opening for Jesus to take this conversation to a deeper level, which is exactly what He does. In vs. 10 Jesus replies, “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.”

Jesus replies by revealing three things that the woman does not yet know: 1) the gift of God; 2) who it is that she is talking to; and 3) that which the Stranger can provide for her…living water. Jesus says, “If you knew about these three things…you would be the asker, and I would be the Giver.”

Notice how different this language is from that of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. Instead of telling the woman “You must…”, Jesus leads with “I have a gift for you…it is the most satisfying gift that will minister to the deepest needs of your heart…all you have to do is ask.” Notice also that Jesus does not even engage with the titles and the cultural biases. He doesn’t get offended or in any way try to justify his position as a Jew. Instead, Jesus goes right for the heart. He uses language she can understand. As one commentator writes, “He provides handles that she can hold on to” by using the language of “living water” as she stands there in the hot sun, drawing water from a well as she has done every day for who knows how long.

Church, learn from Jesus. If we are speaking to people who are self-satisfied and convinced of their own goodness, we must leverage the approach Jesus applied in his conversation with Nicodemus. Nobody earns their way to heaven; no one is “good enough;” we all need to be “born again,” and that happens only by admitting that we are snake bit and placing our faith upon the Son of Man who became our curse to save us all.

However, if we are speaking with people who KNOW they are thirsty, who feel trapped in their shame; those who are desperately needing liberation from their past; those who need no convincing of their sin…then, like Jesus, we offer them the GIFT OF GOD that comes only from the Giver, who is Jesus! That leads me to my final subheading:

IV. The Gift of God

What is the gift of God? It is that which satisfies the soul! It is that which scratches the universal itch! It is the living water that means we will never go thirsty again. It is a new life in Christ, empowered by His Holy Spirit living in us! It is the forgiveness of sins; it is instant and constant access to the Father no matter where we are, 24/7! It is a new identity as God’s beloved
child. It is a new freedom that transcends cultural taboos and biases. It is a hope and a joy that not even death can defeat.

All people everywhere thirst for the Gift of God, though most have no idea what their thirst points to. Every person is on a quest to satisfy that thirst in some way: in pleasure, in success, in religion, in significance, in power, in entertainment. But here is what Jesus just said to a thirsty soul: You will find lasting, eternal satisfaction in ME and ME only…you need only ask.

Now…does the Samaritan woman instantly say, “Gosh, thanks Jesus! That’s awesome! Let’s do this!” No…not at all. As sinful human beings, we are remarkably capable of missing the point. As Aslan says to Digory in the Magician’s Nephew, “Oh Sons of Adam, how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good!” We are all slow of heart to believe, but those in Samaria are particularly skeptical; old wounds heal slowly; and so the woman responds with a bit of indignation. Listen to what she says in vss. 11-12: , “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.”

Not unlike Nicodemus, the woman takes Jesus quite literally and gets offended that He apparently thinks his Jewish water is somehow superior to her Samaritan water here at Jacob’s well! Friends…don’t get frustrated when people miss the point of the gospel. We all have a filter, and no matter how hard we try, people in Samaria will often hear something other than what we said. We must remember, people in Samaria are accustomed to being devalued and ridiculed by “the good, religious people.” They are accustomed to conflict and enmity. We should not expect people to immediately grasp and appreciate the offer of Living Water.

In this instance, the Samaritan woman interprets the offer of our Lord as an intended insult; so she mocks Jesus for not having any container for drawing water, and we can’t help but hear the sarcasm when she asks, “Where do you get that “living water?” Then she asks a question that no Jew in his right mind would ever answer in the affirmative: “Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” Her point is clear: if this water was good enough for the Jewish patriarch, it should be good enough for everybody…Jews and Samaritans alike…and it would be arrogant to say that the “living water” of this Jewish traveler would in some way trump the water from Jacob’s well.
Notice that Jesus does not address her snarkiness. Instead, Jesus aims steadily upon the needs of her heart, and He speaks to those needs.

In vss. 13-14 Jesus replies, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Jesus appeals to her thirst, and he says something that rings so true it hurts: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again.” The “water of the world” only satisfies for a moment…we all know that is true. Whatever our “water” of choice, we will need more of it the next time to find any satisfaction. If we turn to a drug, we will need more drugs next week than this week. If we turn to money, we will need even more money than before to find satisfaction. The same is true for pleasure of any kind, success, power, significance…you name it. Like Edmund in The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, the first taste of Turkish Delight simply leaves us desperate for more Turkish Delight. That which we thought would satisfy our hunger only makes us hunger all the more.

“Here is the difference,” says Jesus, “…whoever drinks of the water that I give will never be thirsty again.” Jesus offers that which all seek but few ever find: He offers contentment. He offers a satisfaction that does not wane. He offers that which produces joy, life, and fulfillment not just for a moment, but for all eternity. Jesus states, “The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Jesus offers a gift to every thirsty soul: living water…a never-ending fountain of life that satisfies, that brings about the eternal kind of life in all who receive it.

This is the Gift of God. The gift is free for all who would ask and receive it.

Church, when in Samaria, we lead with humility; we make ourselves vulnerable by asking; we appeal to the thirst of the human soul; and we extend the Gift of God…patiently, consistently, regardless of how many times the offer is misinterpreted or rejected.
As we’ll see next Sunday, Jesus will model how to go deeper with the Samaritans and address their questions with wisdom and grace.

For now, let me conclude by once again challenging you to think about your life, to think about your call, and to take an inventory of your heart. First, do you know that the Living Water that Jesus speaks of resides within you? I’m not talking about a feeling; I’m talking about the TRUTH of the GOSPEL, the very presence of the Holy Spirit, residing in your soul…producing a hope that does not fade and a joy that cannot be extinguished, even when your feelings and circumstances are at their worst. If you do not have the Living Water…ask the Giver, and have faith that you will receive what you have asked for!

If the Living Water wells up within you, then we must look to Samaria! There are those who are so very thirsty, they are discouraged, they are embittered, they are convinced that we don’t love them. Church, we need to go…we need to engage…we need to follow Jesus’ example, and by His grace…we are to offer this hurting culture the Gift of God and the Living Water that satisfies the soul.

Ask Jesus to show you where you are to go, who you are to reach, what barriers you are to break down. Ask Jesus where you should buy food, or a car…He may very well send you into Samaria for a reason…so that the Light of Christ in you might bring liberation and hope to our hurting culture. Go now, and carry the Living Water to a thirsty people. Let us pray.