The Gospel of John: *Spirit and Truth*

John 4:13-26

We once again return to Sychar where we find Jesus engaged in a conversation with a woman from Samaria. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word as we find it in John 4:13-26.

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.[a] 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.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” 17 The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” 19 The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” 21 Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” 25 The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

My message this morning is entitled, *Spirit and Truth*, and I have organized it around four subheadings: 1) He Already Knows; 2) Removing Distractions; 3) Spirit and Truth; and 4) How We Know.

I. **He Already Knows**

If you recall, Jesus is in the region of Samaria on His way to the region of Galilee. His disciples are away in town purchasing food, and while Jesus rests next to Jacob’s well, a woman of Samaria approaches to draw water. Though all the cultural prejudices of the first century strictly forbid any kind of exchange between a Jew and a Samaritan, as well as a Jewish Rabbi and a woman, Jesus throws caution to the wind and initiates a conversation with the Samaritan woman. He asks her for a drink, and immediately the woman questions how He, a Jewish man, would be so bold as to ask her, a Samaritan woman, for anything at all. Jesus gently responds, stating that if she knew about the gift of God, and if she knew who Jesus was, she would be the one asking, and Jesus would provide her with living water. The woman mocks Jesus, pointing out that he has nothing with which to draw water. She cynically asks where Jesus gets his “living water,” and then points out the fact that she is drawing her water from Jacob’s well, implying that there could not be a more prestigious well in either Jewish or Samaritan circles.

Jesus then speaks to the woman’s deepest longings as we just read in vss. 13-14, “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.[a] The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Jesus reminds the woman that ordinary water only satisfies for a moment; where as the gift of God satisfies forever. He has described the gift as living water…as a spring of water welling up to eternal life.
Now, we should take a moment to note that Jesus and the Samaritan woman are speaking on two different planes. Jesus is addressing the thirst of this woman’s spirit…He is thus speaking on a spiritual plane; but she is hearing Jesus through her pain, and so she only hears Jesus on a purely physical plane. This misunderstanding was evident in her former response, and once again in the way she responds in vs. 15: Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty again or have to come here to draw water.

Once again her response is a physical, earthy response that is quite practical in nature. In other words, if Jesus is offering some magic water that would keep her from every getting thirsty, bring it on. And if that magic water means she never again has to walk a mile to fetch water from this old well, all the better!

However, we should assume that at this moment, the woman of Samaria likely thinks that this Jewish stranger is a few sandwiches short of a picnic! Her response is surely tongue-in-cheek and dripping with sarcasm. In fact, she is all but ready to walk away and be done with this conversation. We should not think that she has even an ounce of hope that her life will ever change. She has no hope that this magic water even exists; nor does she have any confidence that this sweaty Jewish traveler can help her with all his promises of eternal life. Jesus has offered her that which she dare not entertain as even a possibility…especially given her story…a story this nice man has no knowledge of. No doubt this woman is secretly thinking: “If this Jew knew me…if He knew my story…He wouldn’t be making such kind offers. It doesn’t matter…he’s crazy anyways, and I have a long walk home.”

Notice that Jesus sees right to the heart of the woman, and so in vs. 16, He says, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” At the very mention of “husband,” we should assume that this woman stops dead in her tracks. The very word cuts like a knife. She is immediately reminded of the mess that has been her life up to this moment…it is a mess she would rather not share with the Jewish stranger, so she quietly responds, “I have no husband.” Her answer is safe and accurate. She could have lied and said her husband was out of town on a business trip or that he was a soldier at war. There are many ways she could have lied and hidden from Jesus; but, for whatever reason, she finds herself telling Him the truth…though not the whole truth. We now get the sense that she is turning away. This conversation has become personal, and she is eager to run away, eager to escape another painful reminder of her life and shame. But as she turns away to make her escape, Jesus replies: “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.”

We can almost see the woman’s face flush as she hears her history stated aloud from a total stranger. And then it dawns on her: He already knows. This Stranger knows her whole story…He has known from the start. Immediately she is rethinking their conversation…even His generous offer…in light of this new understanding: He knew all along. Now, for the first time, she is beginning to get that He was offering her something to quench the thirst of her broken heart… but how could this Man know? There is only one answer. She turns to Jesus and states, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.”

In the ancient mindset, it was assumed that prophets had special knowledge and insight granted to them by God. Perhaps you might recall the story of Jesus and the sinful woman who anointed
his feet with expensive ointment and wiped his feet with her hair that we find in Luke 7. Remember that when a Pharisee witnessed what was happening, he said to himself (vs. 39), “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of a woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.”

Right now the Samaritan woman understands that only a prophet of God could possibly have known about her past...that she had already been married five times and that the man she was now living with was not actually her husband. As many of us have discovered in our relationship with Jesus: He already knows, and there is nowhere to hide.

Now Church, there is something quite powerful happening here, and I don’t want you to miss it.

At this moment, the Samaritan woman is feeling exposed and vulnerable…and as you know, that is typically a very uncomfortable position to be in for most people. No doubt this woman has been exposed and vulnerable in the past, and it has always led to pain. It is no secret that this cruel world is unforgiving of those with a checkered past. However, here is what is beginning to become clear in her mind as she looks at Jesus: This Man knew about her past, and He still asked her for a drink. This Man knew about her past, and He still offered her living water and the gift of God. This Man knew about her past, and yet even now He looks upon her with love and understanding. This Man knew about her past all along, and yet He allowed her the privilege of revealing herself and her situation. This Man knew about her past, but what clearly mattered the most to Him was that she chose to tell the truth when asked…as if her truthfulness was far more important than her past. This is a moment of revelation…in fact, there are two revelations taking place here according to William Barclay. Here’s what he writes:

There are two revelations in Christianity: the revelation of God and the revelation of ourselves. No man ever really sees himself until he sees himself in the presence of Christ; and then he is appalled at the sight. There is another way of putting it—Christianity begins with a sense of sin. It begins with the sudden realization that life as we are living it will not do. We awake to ourselves and we awake to our need of God.

The grace of Jesus and His kind offer, combined with His light that now reveals her condition, immediately makes the woman aware of her need for God. But how is she to respond to God? Where is she supposed to respond to God? She has been taught one thing, but the Jewish teachings contrast what she has been taught. And so she asks the Prophet, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.”

We should not think that the woman is picking a fight. She clearly wants to make things right with God. and thus she is asking a reasonable spiritual question: in light of my broken past and your generous offer of God’s gift, how do I make things right with God? Where do I go? How am I supposed to know what is true and where to go?

Church, when we do ministry in Samaria, it is not enough that we simply offer people the Gift of God. We must also be prepared to engage their genuine and meaningful questions. In other words, we must be ready to remove the distractions that would keep people from knowing Jesus.

II. Removing the Distractions
In order to deal with the religious distractions of people in Samaria, we must be willing to listen to and engage their cultural beliefs and assumptions. People everywhere have been taught untruths about God and religion, and they will need time and assistance to sort through those untruths.

In this case, the Samaritan woman had been taught a redacted version of the Jewish faith, and therefore she had worshipped in ignorance. She had been taught that it was on Mount Gerizim that Abraham had been willing to sacrifice Isaac; she had been taught it was there that Melchizedek had appeared to Abraham; she had been taught that it was on Mount Gerizim that Moses had first entered an altar and sacrificed to God when the people entered the Promised Land, although it was on Mount Ebal that was done (Deut. 27:4). In other words, her forefathers tampered with the text of scripture, they ignored all but the first five book of the OT, they redacted the Jewish history to glorify Mount Gerizim as the most sacred spot in the world; and, as such, she had been taught to despise Jerusalem.

Can you see that though this woman is now desperate to find God, she is distracted by what she has been taught, and she is asking the Prophet to clear up the confusion…which Jesus is quite happy to do!

In vs. 21 Jesus replies, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.”

Jesus begins by saying, “Believe ME.” Don’t miss that church. The whole point of the Gospel is to BELIEVE Jesus, not just to believe “in” Jesus. Jesus is the unique and final authority on every spiritual question…period. Why? Because He is the great I AM, as we will see at the end of the passage. I’ll come back to that in a minute.

Secondly, Jesus encourages the woman that WHERE one worships is soon to be a moot point. Where is not even a relevant question. Who is a better question: and the answer is that you should worship the Father!

Next, Jesus risks offense by clearly stating that the Samaritans are wrong about some things. Why? Because they worship what they do not know. Remember, the Samaritans assimilated pagan idolatry and traditions into their practice of religion along with the first five books of the Old Testament. The result was a religion of ignorance, fear, and superstition. Jesus unapologetically points to God’s revelation of Himself in the Old Testament and says, “As Jews, we worship what we know”…God’s self-revelation; and that revelation states clearly that salvation is from the Jews.

Church, it is both logical and reasonable that conflicting and contradictory statements about God cannot all be true. In fact, the greatest plague upon all of humanity is wrong thinking about God. Thinking wrongly about God accounts for much of the world’s evil behavior in every sector of life. It will be impossible to do ministry in Samaria without having to do exactly what Jesus has done here, and that is to take a stand FOR what is true; and, by necessity, to take a stand opposed
to that which is untrue. Jesus firmly but lovingly informs the woman that there is TRUTH, and that her perspective of God and religion has been contaminated with falsehood.

However, notice that Jesus does not dwell on this point. Instead, He moves on to distill what is the most important thing for her to know about how to access God. In vss. 23-24 He states, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” This leads me to my third subheading…

III. Spirit and Truth

Jesus says quite a bit here in vss. 23 and 24, so let’s take a moment to break it down and examine each part.

1) A New Time: First of all, Jesus is revealing to the Samaritan woman that a new time is coming, and has even now come for her. This new time, this hour, this Kairos moment, is being initiated by the Son of Man who now stands before her. We must always remember that Jesus initiated a NEW arrangement, a NEW covenant, and that is exactly what He is revealing here.

2) A New Place: The days of temple worship and endless sacrifices is drawing to a close. Soon the ultimate sacrifice will be accomplished once and for all, and access to the Father will be available to all in His name…the name of Jesus…and that access will be available EVERYWHERE, all over the world. There will be no need of temples and buildings, no need of sacrifices, no need of religious rituals or superstitions. All those who desire to commune with the Father will have access through Jesus and the Holy Spirit wherever they are.

3) A New Way: Whereas people had always thought of worshipping God to include making physical sacrifices in a physical place, Jesus reveals that the new way of worshipping God requires only that we worship Him in spirit. “Since God is spirit,” says Jesus, “we must worship Him in spirit.” So what is Jesus referring to when He says we should worship in “spirit?” The Greek word here is “pneuma,” and it simply means “spirit.” Thus, there are two possibilities for understanding what Jesus is saying. First, we know that Jesus will send the Holy Spirit when He ascends, so we might very well conclude that Jesus is pointing to a new kind of worship made available through the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit quickens the spirit of the believer, empowering us to commune with the Father. We also learn in Romans 8 that the Holy Spirit intercedes for the believer with groans that words cannot express, because we don’t even know how to pray! Although pointing to the Holy Spirit makes perfect theological sense, many commentators felt that Jesus was not yet pointing to the Holy Spirit when he addressed the Samaritan woman.

That would leave us with the second way of understanding pneuma…and that is that true worshippers will be those who worship God in their spirit.

Our spirit is the deepest, most eternal part of our being. The spirit is the most honest part of who we are. The spirit speaks the language of the heart; the spirit is the source of our passion; and only the spirit knows and conveys what we truly believe to our core.
We all know that we can do a great many things with our bodies that lack the involvement of our spirits, right? We can sing songs with our voices, and never engage our spirits. We can attend church services, listen to sermons and read the Bible without every engaging our spirits. We can give money to the poor; we can give Christmas presents; we can even tell our spouses that we love them…and all the while our spirits are not engaged in what we are doing or saying. We all know that there is a qualitative difference when we fully engage our spirits in what we are doing as opposed to those things we do out of rote habit or insincere motives.

Here’s what Jesus just said: the Father is looking for those who worship in spirit! In other words, the Father is not so much interested in your attendance record at church, or what percentage of your income you are tithing, or how many bad words you didn’t say. The Father wants YOU…He is looking for those who will give themselves wholly to Him, holding nothing back…because that’s what it means to do anything with all of your spirit. It means that we give Him all that we are, all of our emotions, all of our intelligence, all of our hopes, all of our faith, all of our energy…when we worship in spirit, it means we worship holding nothing back. I believe this is exactly what the scripture means when we read that the first and greatest commandment is that we love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, strength and mind…that is precisely what it means to worship God in spirit! And it goes without saying that if we worship God in spirit, our actions and attitudes will eventually reflect what we worship.

This understanding of the use of “spirit” makes sense given the question asked by the Samaritan woman. She is asking “where do I go,” Jesus responds: “Where is irrelevant…worship the Father with all your heart…with your whole spirit…and worship Him in the Truth of who He has revealed Himself to be.

Why is this a new way to worship? Because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, a new relationship with the Father is now available to all who believe in the Son. In Jesus, we can now commune directly with the Father through our forgiven spirits…this, I believe, is exactly what Jesus is saying to the Samaritan woman.

4) A New Truth: Finally, says Jesus, we MUST worship the Father in spirit and in TRUTH. What is the truth that Jesus is referring to? I think there are a few nuances here. First, to worship the Father in truth is to worship God as He reveals Himself in His Word. We all, like the Samaritans, have a tendency to edit God and redact God to how we think God should be. How often do we hear people actually say, “My God would never…..” Exactly: the gods of our own making would never offend us, never send anyone to Hell, and always allow us to do whatever we want to do! Creating a god in our own image is called idolatry, and it is a tremendous offense to the One, True God who has revealed Himself in scripture! To worship the Father in truth is to first add nothing nor remove anything from what He has revealed about Himself. Unless we worship the Father in truth, we are worshipping a god of our own making…a god who did not create us, and a god who cannot save us.

Jesus is also pointing towards Himself when he states that true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Why? Because Jesus will later identify Himself as the Truth! In John 14:6 Jesus will say of himself, “I am the way, the TRUTH, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”
Jesus is pointing to a time that is coming and now has come when access to the Father will require the invocation of His Son, Jesus. Why? Because Jesus is the sacrifice. Jesus is the mediator between God and men. Remember, in the former covenant, sacrifices were to be made if people had any hope of accessing the Father. Sin separates people from God, so a sacrifice is required to atone for the sin and restore the relationship. Jesus became the Lamb of God, and His perfect sacrifice takes away the sin of the world so that those who believe in Him are forgiven, and their access to the Father is restored. They have been reconciled to God. Thus, to worship the Father is to worship Him in spirit, and in Christ. Let me conclude briefly now with my final subheading:

IV. How We Know

When in Samaria, we will have to confront untruths about God as we extend God’s gift of Living Water to thirsty souls. By virtue of the fact that we live in a pluralistic culture, our claim to have access to truth that is both exclusive and incompatible with untruths will surely offend the very people we are trying to reach. No doubt we will be asked time and again, “How can you be so sure you are right? What makes your version of god more reliable than my version? Why should I believe you?”

When asked such questions, it is best and most advisable to recognize your own limitations. Whatever we do know about God, we should never claim to know all that there is know about God, and we should be quick to acknowledge that we might be in err about some of our beliefs or practices, since we are all sinful human beings who are on a lifetime quest of understanding who God is and how we are to live. Humility goes a long way in Samaria.

However, at the same time, we should always point people to the authority, who is Jesus. How can we know that Jesus is an authority who can be trusted? Our text shows us. Both the Samaritans and the Jews believed that a Messiah would come…a prophet akin to Moses…who would make things clear. The scriptures foretold of this One to come, and throughout the Old Testament there are numerous prophecies of His coming that predated the life of Jesus by thousands of years.

Then, here on this occasion in John 4 (as well as on other occasions), Jesus states clearly who He is. Look at the last few lines of our text for this morning, beginning with vs. 25: 25 The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

Though not counted amongst the famous “Seven I am Statements” in John’s gospel, Jesus clearly states “I am.” In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus claims to be the long-awaited Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of Man foretold by the prophets.

To the secular mind, prophecies and fulfilled prophecies sound like “hocus pocus.” But as Christians, we stake an incredible amount of weight on the fact that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled dozens upon dozens of Messianic prophecies. We also claim the empty tomb. Jesus is the only one said to have been publicly executed and then risen on the third day, as witnessed by hundreds of people. Jesus is unique in all of human history. All of our lives are dated to His life.
All of history is dated to His life. If you are open to learning more about the transformative influence Jesus had on the treatment of women, slaves, children, education, and many other areas of society, I encourage you to pick up a copy of John Ortberg’s *Who Was This Man?* as he traces the influence of Christ throughout history.

Jesus is our ultimate authority, and should people question us, we would do well to point people to Jesus. Encourage people to read Jesus for themselves. Jesus is quite competent to speak for Himself and to speak to the heart of people who are open to meeting Him.

So, in closing, let me remind you of the Gospel. In Jesus we find our loving God coming to earth as one of us. Like the Samaritan woman at the well, He meets us in our place of great need, and He offers us Himself…the Gift of God, the one who can satisfy our deepest longings with His Living Water. And remember…Jesus offers us this gift of grace knowing full well all that we have done. He already knows everything, nothing is hidden from Him…and still He loves us and lays down His life for us.

As we see ourselves in His beautiful presence, we discover that we are full of corruption, and our response should be one of repentance and a longing to be made right with God. We are invited then to place our belief and trust in Jesus as the One who reconciled us to God through His shed blood on a Roman cross. As we look to Him, we are saved, and we are born again through the Holy Spirit making all things new. This gift of new life in Christ is offered to all who will receive it. And for those who receive it, there is now unrestricted access to the Father as we worship Him in spirit and in truth, both now and for all eternity.

This is the good news of the Gospel. It demands a response. Will you pray with me? `