

SIX-FOLD TEST FOR MULTIETHNIC MINISTRY

SERMON SERIES: POPULATION | PARTICIPATION | POWER | PACE-SETTING | PURPOSEFUL NARRATIVE | PRACTICING SOLIDARITY

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Population

#1 Is the Covenant reaching increasing numbers of people among increasing numbers of populations?

John 4:1-42, NIV

JESUS TALKS WITH A SAMARITAN WOMAN

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them

will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

THE DISCIPLES REJOIN JESUS

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him.



Meanwhile his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.”

But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

MANY SAMARITANS BELIEVE

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

Greetings. My name is Reverend Dierdra Clark, and it gives me joy to lean in to the Six-Fold Test today as we study John 4:1-42. I am particularly going to focus on the P that stands for population. In this text, we will see Jesus teach us about how we reach across our own boundaries, our preconceived notions of others, in order to live, worship, and share the gospel with all of God’s people—those we do not know, those who may be different from us, those who are from different places and different spaces—and how we actually make ourselves known to the other.

Many of you know the Scripture I’m going to talk about today. It is commonly known as “the Samaritan woman at the well” or “the woman at the well.” Specif-

ically, in this story, we see Jesus making himself known to an outcast—a foreigner—and serving as a true living example of how we are called to live out our lives as followers of Christ.

I’m going to ask us all to reflect for a moment on our own thoughts, our own actions, and our own habits. Are we making ourselves known to the other by reaching more people and more places with the gospel—even when it means reaching out to people we don’t know who are different? How do we break down walls? How do we break down barriers? How do we extend a hand? How do we intentionally, deliberately seek out the other? We will see today in the text that when we come before God and embrace who he is and share that, we too are doing the work of God.

This teaching is important because while we may think about breaking down walls and crossing barriers, we sometimes think of it as just a nice thing to do—a nice Christian thing to do—but we don’t think of it as something we *must* do. Talking to that stranger. Talking to that homeless person you walk by. Fellowshiping with that African American person or that Asian American person. Listening to the stories of that indigenous person you just met. Listening to the stories of that person from another country. Sometimes we say to ourselves, “Well, that’s a nice thing to do. It’s a good thing to do.” But what I’m going to show you this morning—what I challenge you with this morning—is that if we are going to follow Christ with all that we are and all that we have, we *must* do that. We must share the gospel with those we don’t know and those who are different—not as a good thing to do, but as how we live out our lives as worshiping the Christ, our Lord and Savior. We must make ourselves known to the other. We must make ourselves known to the stranger, to the outcast, and to the foreigner. Jesus does that, and I believe he expects us to do that too.

But don’t listen to me. I’m just Reverend Clark. Listen to Jesus because it’s in the Word. I want to set some context before we jump in. Some interpretations of this text simply speak about the Samaritan woman as a sinner who had five husbands. Some commentaries oversimplify this story and talk about the woman as just a sinner. To me that interpretation serves more of a patriarchal narrative. But we know that Jesus came to break down barriers and cultural norms, and turn



everything upside down. So explaining this text as being just about a woman as a sinner is far too elementary. Instead, I believe that the right framework when looking at this text is to understand that the woman at the well is purposely placed between the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3, who had religious power, and the royal official in John 4 who had political power. I want to be clear:

Religious power and political power are both things and structures—as history teaches us and the Bible teaches us—that can work against the will of God.

In John 3, we see Nicodemus, who had religious power, get into a theological debate with Jesus about the Son of God. Then in John 4, we see the royal official who had political power; he needed signs and wonders to believe in the power of Christ. And in between these two men, we see the Samaritan woman. So in the biblical text, we see religious power on one side and political power on one side being represented by two men. And in the middle we see the Samaritan woman. When we read the text, we see this woman who actually does come to believe in the power of Christ through her own theological exchange where she and Jesus go back and forth about the customs and traditions of worship of the Jews and Samaritans.

My point is this: In the end, we see this Samaritan woman be the one who shares the gospel with everybody, and in turn everybody becomes believers. She had no political power. She had no religious power. But she arrives at a place where she will become the woman of God who preaches the gospel so widely that many of the Samaritans came to know Jesus.

A close study of the text will show you that it doesn't matter whether you are a Samaritan or a Jew. It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor. It doesn't matter whether you're a woman or a man, white, African American, Asian American, indigenous, Hispanic, Caribbean, African, whether you're from the South as my husband is, or you're from the North and a Yankee like myself. In the end—in all these narratives—what Jesus is teaching us is: There is a true place of worship and it surpasses the temple on the mountain, and to really make sure others experience that true place of worship, sometimes you're going to have to cross barriers and customs just as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman.

So let's look at the text.

We learn in verse 4 that Jesus had to go through

Samaria. Now, a Jew going through Samaria is actually a big deal. Samaria and Israel represent two very distinct cultures. I want you to think of it like this. Some of you may know that the Red Sox and the Yankees have this huge rivalry. It actually dates back to the time of Babe Ruth. Jesus going through Samaria is something like this: I am born and bred in New York; I'm a Yankees fan. It's like a Boston Red Sox fan coming into the Bronx, where Yankee Stadium is, on a steamy, hot summer day with a Boston Red Sox cap on and asking me for an ice-cold drink of water. "Where can I get some water?" Now, I see his Red Sox hat. He's got some Red Sox gear on. And I'm like, "You're in my neck of the woods?" That is what it was like for Jesus to go into Samaria. He was in some other neck of the woods.

So Jesus going through Samaria—it's a big deal. According to many scholars, he didn't even have to cross Samaria. Many Jews at that time would bypass Samaria. Some of those Red Sox fans, they're going to bypass Yankee Stadium. But this Jesus, our Jesus, he's radical, right? So he goes right into Samaria. He intentionally becomes a foreigner in a new land. And not only that, he challenges the customs of the time by speaking to a woman. That's our Jesus.

Verse 7 says, "When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?'" Can you imagine that? In those times, a man asking a woman for a drink in public! It was Jesus who started this conversation. When he asks this woman for a drink, he's boldly refusing to be boxed in by any customs and traditions or stereotypes. He's breaking all kinds of racial and cultural barriers with just one question. His actions broke the stereotype. His actions said everything. And it was Jesus's actions that allowed room for this woman at the well to hear the gospel, to learn about worship, and ultimately to share the gospel.

There's not a day that goes by that I don't see some inspirational word on social media about loving each other, a photo about how we should behave toward each other, or some timely quote from Dr. King about how our character should be. And yes, we know that words matter. The words we say to each other and about each other make a difference. But our actions speak so much louder. In this text, we see Jesus speak quite loudly with his actions—becoming a stranger, talking to the woman, sharing himself. To underscore how profound his actions



are, we only need to look at the disciples. When they come back, they're dumbfounded that Jesus is talking to this woman.

The Scripture says, "Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman" (v. 27). Jesus is out of order. He's radical. You can imagine people saying, "Why is he talking to her? Does he know who she is? Does he know that she has five husbands?" Yes. Yes. Jesus knows. Church, this is no different than some of the divisions we see today. I talked earlier about my Yankee self and my husband who's a Southerner. We've got blue states; we've got red states. We are so divided. We've got religious right, and we've got progressive liberals. We have racial differences that continue to divide us—ethnic differences. In the summer of 2020, we witnessed a worldwide reckoning about one of America's original sins of racism. And that was good. I welcomed that. But I also recognize that after the protests and after the words, we sometimes retreat into our own neighborhoods, our own places of comfort, and our own people. We might say, "She's my people." And sometimes that's fine, but where did we get that from? Where did we learn that it's okay for us to live separately and to worship separately? We didn't learn it from Jesus. We didn't learn it from God's Word. We don't see Jesus teach that. In fact, we see the opposite. Jesus breaks down barriers.

The Samaritan woman says, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (v. 9). Jesus doesn't defend that. He just acts. He continues to engage with her. His actions were speaking louder than his words. How are you engaging with the others? Are you sharing the gospel with others who are different from you? Others who might actually worship at a different place than you? Sometimes God is waiting for us to act. Surely the Samaritan woman did not know she was going to become a light to share the gift of the gospel. Many times God picks the most unlikely people to do his wonderful work. Sometimes we have the notion that it's the smartest, the swiftest, the one with the most eloquent words, the one who's the most blessed—and all that—who do more for Christ. We don't see that in this story, do we? The Samaritan woman, she's got all these husbands. She comes to the well in the middle of the day. Many scholars believe that she did this because a woman with five husbands (or former husbands) would

be alienated from her community, so she came when nobody would be noticing. But that doesn't matter to Jesus.

You know, as parents, we try to look out for our kids' best interests. We try to be a step ahead of them so they can have a successful, God-filled life. We give them advice along the way. And sometimes the simplest advice—"Make sure you have gas when you're driving that long distance" or even (for younger kids, in my case) "Put your homework in the backpack the night before so you don't forget it in the morning"—falls on deaf ears. We find ourselves telling our kids the same thing over and over again. And sometimes we're wondering, "Are they hearing us? I know I'm talking, and it seems to just go in one ear and out the other." So at some point, many of us turn to natural consequences. You allow the actions to be the lesson. You allow them to run out of gas on their way somewhere. Chances are, they'll think about it twice before they run out of gas again. You might allow them to leave their homework at home. You saw it on the kitchen table. You saw them leave the house. And they showed up in class without their homework and they got less than a stellar grade. We know that sometimes the only way your kids learn is if they take the consequences.

Church, we can talk and talk until we're blue in the face. We can talk about unity. We can talk about this ministry of reconciliation. We can talk about the communion table as a place where we all come together. We can sing wonderful hymns, pray beautiful prayers, read books, and hear sermons; but sometimes it's all words. Until we do the things that consciously and intentionally bring us into community with others and share the gospel with others who are different, it is all words. So our Lord Jesus Christ gives us an example. He acts; he engages with the woman at the well. And when he does that, he sets aside her question about who she is—her identity. We get trapped in this sense of who I am. What's your identity? Who are you? But Jesus sets that aside. And church, isn't that what we're to do too? Isn't that what we all want: To be known outside of this identity that's been placed on us, but to be known as how God knows us?

The Scripture says, "Jesus answered, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is it asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.' 'Sir,' the woman said, 'you have nothing to



draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself?” (vv. 10-12). She’s challenging him.

But Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again” (he’s talking about the water from the well), “but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water, welling up to eternal life” (vv. 13-14). Jesus is offering her something far better than that water at that well. In this part of the text, Jesus is making himself known to the Samaritan woman. He’s making himself known. Church, are we doing that? Are we making ourselves known? Jesus is.

At this point, just as with Nicodemus, this is where Jesus gets into a back-and-forth about the literal meaning of his words. In John 3, Nicodemus asked, “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” We see the same kind of back and forth with the Samaritan woman. She says, “You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can I get this living water?” And then she even goes as far as to say, “Are you greater than Jacob?” She could not believe what she could not see. And what things could she not believe? “Well, why is this Jewish man talking to me? I have five husbands. I’m really kind of isolated in my community because people talk about me. Why is he talking? And also, who is this man who claims to be able to do things better than Jacob?” There are so many things she could not see.

What do we do in the presence of God when we cannot see? Because, face it, church, sometimes we cannot see what God is doing in our lives. We stand at the gateway of something wonderful, but we can’t see it—something that is just over that threshold but we can’t see it. We’re too afraid or we simply don’t believe. We say to ourselves, “Okay, God, if you would just give me that sneak peek about what is on the other side, I can cross that threshold.” Or, “God, if you would just give me the bonus that I had been waiting for, I’ll be more generous.” “If you would just give me that child that I’ve been praying for, I’ll make sure they go to Bible study; I’ll make sure I raise them right.” “If you just give me that preview, Lord, ... because I cannot see.” This Samaritan woman, at this point, she can’t see.

We see Jesus break down the barrier of identity by just talking to the Samaritan woman. But she’s still stuck in the place of identity. Church, do we get stuck in that place of identity? Who are you? Whose child are you? Who are your parents? What do you do? Where do you work? No matter what she keeps on asking, Jesus keeps engaging. It is the water that he’s engaging with—this living water. It’s the presence of God that produces this continual refreshing. That is what Jesus is offering to this woman. Jesus is offering himself to her.

The text says, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again” (talking about the water in the well), “but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become like a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” You see, Jesus is talking about something that the Samaritan woman could not see and something she could not touch. The only thing she can see is her thirst. But I believe it’s her thirst for truth that keeps her at that well because she goes back and forth with Jesus about who he is. And she even goes back and forth about her own situation. She stays there because I feel like she is searching for truth. And Jesus continues to make himself known. He wants her to experience the living water.

Church, what stops us from making ourselves known? What stops us from making ourselves known to the person we walk by every day who might be homeless and who might be asking for something, to the person who is the cashier at the grocery store, to the single mother, to the divorced dad, or to the janitor in your building. What stops us from knowing them? Sometimes it’s time. (And that’s a whole sermon in itself about busyness.) But more times than not, it’s nothing more than our preconceived notions of the other. But Jesus doesn’t stop. He makes himself known.

But wait, there’s more. Finally, after all this back and forth and the Samaritan woman’s “Who are you?” and her questions, the conversation arrives at the Messiah. The Samaritan woman finally understands her own need and gets to the point of the Messiah. Because in the end, that is why you must make yourself known. In the end, it’s all about worshiping the Lord—our Christ, our Savior.

The Samaritan woman, who starts to now see, understands it’s through worship that we receive the living water. Once she starts to see, she knows the living water is all about worship.



In this passage, we see that living water is not about the culture you come from. It's not about the customs. It's not about the rituals. It's not about the country you come from, the ethnicity you come from, the job you have, the family you have, or the education you have. Instead, this living water is about an inward, personal relationship with the living God. The living water is the continual source of life that is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each and every one of us who believes in the living God. When we drink from that water, of course we'll never thirst.

The text says, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (v. 23). It is not about worshiping on the mountain. It's not about worshiping as a Jew or Samaritan, as a Black person, as a white person, Asian American, Latino, indigenous person, Democrat or Republican, a Red Sox fan, or a Yankees fan. It's not about any of that. As followers of Christ, we make ourselves known so that they, too—all those people I just said—can experience the living water.

Sometimes when you make yourself known, some will mock you. They'll question you. They'll tell you you're doing it wrong. The text tells us that when the disciples return and see Jesus ministering to this woman, they do not understand why he's talking to her. They behave like the church today: somewhat judgmental, somewhat disjointed, and somewhat divided. I wonder if Jesus ministering to the Samaritan woman made the disciples ask themselves what was their own understanding of Jesus. "Why do I find it odd that he's talking to this Samaritan woman? What do I understand about Jesus?" Because that's really the question when we talk about ministering to others: What is my understanding of Jesus tied to? Is our understanding of the gospel tied to our national hymns or myths or our own religious structures? Is our understanding tied to what our parents taught us and not so much what Jesus is teaching us? Is our understanding of Jesus tied to our own suffering which sometimes blocks out what Christ is trying to tell us and leads us to not trust him or to doubt him? Is our understanding bound up in the people we surround ourselves with—"our people"? Is our understanding of Jesus about the paycheck we receive or don't receive, the people we see on TV, or our national heroes? Just what is our

understanding of Jesus tied to?

Perhaps our understanding, in the end, should become like the Samaritan woman's. Jesus came to know her outside of her identity, her ethnicity, her beliefs, and her customs. He was not worried about what others would say. He was not shackled by biases and shame. He got down to who she really was.

Church, if we are going to live into the gospel, we have to do that too. If we're going to share the gospel with increasing numbers of people, among increasing numbers of populations, we must do that too. That might mean, church, we have to shed our own identity. We might need to enter a foreign land in our own community. And sometimes we might need to become known to others. When we do that—just like the Samaritan woman, sharing the gospel in places and spaces beyond what we could even imagine—we share the gospel. We make ourselves known. Amen.