

SERMON—John 4: 5-42 - Third Sunday in Lent - March 12, 2023
Rev. Timothy W. Sadler, Pastor—Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Lancaster, PA.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In this gospel lesson, everything Jesus does shatters customs, traditions, and faith as usual. Jews didn't talk to Samaritans. These are two groups that wanted nothing to do with one another.

Men didn't talk to women they weren't related to. Jews thought the ultimate worship experience took place in the Temple and the Samaritans thought it took place on their mountain. All these careful rules and customs that people had constructed over time were called into question by one encounter with Jesus.

The disciples had trouble processing what was taking place because they didn't understand what it meant for Jesus to be the Messiah. They still thought in terms of warrior king---but Jesus talked of Spirit and truth.

This whole story is about how human customs and blind loyalty to traditions placed barriers around people and faith. It took Jesus to break through these barriers and lift up a truth that was higher than all their human constructs.

There is a line in a song titled "Anthem" by Leonard Cohen that goes: "there is a crack in everything that's how the light gets in." The Samaritan woman was confronted by Jesus and this encounter...presented her with a choice: she could continue to hold onto her ideas about life and faith, or---she could be open to the transforming presence of Christ.

Somewhere in her carefully constructed world there must have been a crack because the light got in, and this light illumined her spirit. In the person of Jesus, she was able to discern...the truth of what he said, and this would turn her life upside-down forever.

Spirit and truth. When we talk of truth, we generally tend to focus on our minds, the intellect, and the knowledge we've gained. But truth is so much more than the intellect; it also involves the heart.

In Jesus, this woman experienced the actual presence of God, and this always engages the heart. And when heart and mind both recognize the truth that is before them, this truth resonates...with our spirits. It takes this kind of encounter of the actual experience of God to break through the barriers we've so carefully constructed around our faith, in order for the light to get in.

The mind alone can't discern deeper spiritual truths. That's why the Sadducees and Pharisees had so much trouble with Jesus. Their minds were locked into the way things have always been and... they couldn't imagine a truth different from the one they already knew.

Because this woman allowed her heart and mind to be changed by Jesus, she was able to touch many lives. That's how you know when the transformation is real: the grace of God just naturally...flows through you, out into others. IT brings a joy that reaches far beyond boundaries of class or culture or anything else.

Whenever we talk of transformation within the church, we're talking about more than simply changing practices or worship styles. We're talking about having our hearts and minds transformed. This doesn't mean there's something wrong with us, but it does recognize the truth that we are called to continue to grow deeper spiritually as long as we live.

How we understand God as children is different than how we understand God as adults. For some reason, though, we tend to believe once we reach adulthood, our understanding of life and... faith should no longer change. In fact, people can become quite anxious if someone starts to question faith or scripture.

When we talk about growing in faith, we're not questioning God's truth; we're questioning our own understanding of it. God's truth remains through eternity, but how we look at God and... understand God's work in our lives, changes with each experience. If it doesn't, we might want to think about whether we are allowing the Holy Spirit to teach us.

Probably every one of us can think of a time when we felt overwhelmed by loss. No one gets through life without experiencing loss in some way. We all hold fears about loss, where we can't imagine losing someone or something we love and still finding life meaningful. Yet when we actually experience the loss, even though it may be the greatest pain we've ever felt, we do eventually come through it and whether we're aware of it or not,...we learn much from the experience.

Many years ago, one of my former parishioners, in a former congregation lost her mother and she was, naturally, devastated. It was the first major loss in her life. After she came a distance through the grief process,... she said to me, "If anyone had told me before I lost my mother that I could handle it, and make all those preparations, and help support my other family members, I wouldn't have believed them. Now, I can look back and see how strong I've become because of this experience."

This woman was transformed by her grief experience. She emerged from it a different person than she was before the experience. She grew deeper spiritually and in so many ways,...gained wisdom from the journey.

This is what I mean when I talk of transformation: allowing the light of Christ to enter the darkness of our deepest suffering so that we can somehow be transformed by it. Allowing the light of Christ to enter our ordinary thoughts so we can have the courage to change these things we are thinking that might be putting boundaries around or faith.

The more we're open to this ongoing transformation, the more we are able to serve as channels for the light and grace of God. I wonder how many people in that town would have normally...

Listened to the Samaritan woman about anything, given a lifestyle unusual for that time. Nevertheless, something about the grace of God in her touched their hearts,...and they responded, and they went to see Jesus.

If the light and love of Christ dwells in us—the light and love that overcomes human boundaries and judgments—then when people look at us, they will indeed see Jesus. This is all we're ever called to do.

Let us pray,

Holy Jesus, your very presence continues to transform your church. We are your people, and we celebrate your light and love within us. Give us courage to be teachable and open to however it is you want to work within us and through us. In your most holy name, we pray.
Amen

Thanks be to God. AMEN