

Call to Worship

The Messiah comes, not to meet our expectations, but to bring us the unexpected; not to be known according to our definition, but to define us and reveal our true identity.

The Messiah comes hidden among the poor and lowly, not to be readily understood but to understand our need, not to defend our descriptions but stretch our imaginations, intrude into our settled arrangements, and challenge our conceptions. Let us open our hearts and minds to receive the mysterious Christ, present in our midst, moving unpredictably in our lives. Let us worship God.

Prayer of Invocation

We come before you today, God, as sojourners in the desert, longing for streams of rushing water to flow into our dry places. In Jesus, you wait beside the well to be served and to serve. We are ready for the gift of living water! Sing through us, speak through us, abide with us. We call upon you once more, as we praise your name.

Lord, Open us to all that you would have us be, for you and for others. 'Breakthrough,' into our lives and our church with new possibilities. Amen.

The Word John 4:5-30

He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, which was near the land Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus was tired from his journey, so he sat down at the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me some water to drink." His disciples had gone into the city to buy him some food.

The Samaritan woman asked, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" Because Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other.

Jesus responded, "If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket and the well is deep. Where would you get this living water? You aren't greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave this well to us, and he drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock."

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks from the water that I will give will never be thirsty again. The water that I give will become in those who drink it a spring of water that bubbles up into eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will never be thirsty and will never need to come here to draw water!"

Jesus said to her, "Go, get your husband, and come back here."

The woman replied, "I don't have a husband."

"You are right to say, 'I don't have a husband,'" Jesus answered. "You've had five husbands, and the man you are with now isn't your husband. You've spoken the truth."

The woman said, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you and your people say that it is necessary to worship in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you and your people will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You and your people worship what you don't know; we worship what we know because salvation is from the Jews. But the time is coming—and is here!—when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. The Father looks for those who worship him this way. God is spirit, and it is necessary to worship God in spirit and truth."

The woman said, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us."

Jesus said to her, "I Am—the one who speaks with you."

Just then, Jesus' disciples arrived and were shocked that he was talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

The woman put down her water jar and went into the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I've done! Could this man be the Christ?"⁰ They left the city and were on their way to see Jesus.

Living the Word

Have you ever told a lie? If you do tell lies, they can compound and get you in deeper and deeper until you cannot even remember the truth. One lie is told and that leads to the need for another lie if you cannot go back and share the truth. The lies build until it seems there is no turning back.

In the Disney movie *Pinocchio* based on the children's novel *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by Italian author Carlo Collodi, the plot of the film involves an old wood-carver named Geppetto who carves a wooden puppet named Pinocchio. The puppet is brought to life by a blue fairy, who informs him that he can become a real boy if he proves himself to be "brave, truthful, and unselfish".

An animated puppet, Pinocchio, is punished for each lie that he tells by growth in length of his nose. There are no restrictions on the length of Pinocchio's nose. It grows as he tells lies and at one point grows so long that he cannot even get his nose "through the door of the room".

This story had a major impact on me as a child. I wasn't so concerned about losing my identity as a real child, but I was real concerned about the thought of my nose lengthening if I told a lie. That along with the bar of soap that I tasted the few times that I did lie taught me quite soon that it just wasn't worth it.

Pinocchio is just a story. Noses don't really lengthen when we tell a lie, though some people are found out through a twitch or a blush when they lie. The part of Pinocchio that is true is that to be a real person we do need to be in trusting relationships that can only happen when there aren't any lies.

Have you ever been caught in a lie?

Truth telling seems to be a lost art these days. From witnesses in governmental probes to defendants under oath in the courtroom, people can't seem to remember what they have said, what they did, or what they heard. When someone really wants to emphasize that they are really telling the truth, their face gets animated, they raise their voice and they might say "It's the truth – honest to God!"

Because people seem to misplace the truth so often these days, now may be the ideal time to reveal what Jesus has to say about it. Nearly 2000 years ago, Jesus said, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teaching. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32). In today's scriptures, Jesus helps a Samaritan woman release the liberating power of God's truth in her life.

You may recall that the Pharisees were a group of religious leaders, intent on preserving and upholding the law and tradition. They regarded Jesus and his different kind of ministry as a threat. The Pharisees had learned that Jesus was making more disciples than was John the Baptizer. Being aware of the potential for conflict, Jesus chose to avoid trouble before it started and left the region, heading for Galilee by way of Samaria.

Though the Pharisees considered Samaria and the Samaritans to be an 'unclean' people because of their religious and cultural differences, the gospel of John takes painstaking efforts to show that the good news of Jesus Christ knows no boundaries. The liberating power of God's truth reaches out beyond the racial, cultural and gender barriers that humans have imposed.

John writes that Jesus had to go through Samaria. It is true that the most direct route would go that way, some strict Jews would have refused to go there because of Samaria's history. The Samaritans were a mixed race of Assyrians and Jews, with in which a mixing of religions had resulted. Conflicts between these two cultures, Samaritans and Jews had gone on for 700 years. Despite those deep-seated conflicts, Jesus chose to walk directly through Samaria.

By the time Jesus reached the Samaritan city of Sychar, it was high noon. Tired and thirsty from the journey, Jesus sat by Jacob's well until a Samaritan woman happened along. With Jesus' first words he was going against religious and social protocol. "Give me some water to drink" he asked the unidentified Samaritan woman. In utter amazement, the woman responded. Saying, "Why do you, a Jewish man, ask for something to drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" In shocking fashion, Jesus had broken more than one cultural taboo. First, he was talking to a woman in public.

First-century Jewish culture was very much a man's world. Ironically men were afraid of women and the power of their charming wives able to turn their heads. In public, men were not to speak to women – not even their wives. No wonder the Samaritan woman was shocked to hear Jesus speaking to her.

Also it was not proper for a woman to walk about the streets in the view of the men, unless she was going to the Temple. This conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman took place at midday. The stigma attached to a woman walking around in public at that time of day added to the discomfort of the Samaritan woman. Her very presence there at noon pronounced judgment on her moral character. A 'respectable' woman would have fetched her water that morning.

The woman was amazed that Jesus would ask her for a drink, because Jews didn't eat or drink from the same utensils as Samaritans, as they were considered 'unclean.' Undisturbed, Jesus moved the conversation toward matters of the soul, saying, "*If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water.*" With this reply, Jesus had provided a way for the woman to turn her attention away from her embarrassment at being seen at noon and being addressed by a man in public.

Then as now, people needed help moving from literal to symbolic understandings of spiritual matters. The Samaritan woman was concerned with literal water to quench her physical thirst. Yet, collecting this water at culturally inappropriate times was damaging her on the inside.

Each day she had to wait for the 'respectable' women to go to the well before she dared to venture out. With bowed head and sharp step, she probably hurried through the streets trying to avoid demeaning stares and humiliating catcalls. This well water temporarily satisfied her physical thirst, but it did nothing for her parched spiritual condition. The Samaritan woman needed to be introduced to living water that would bring her eternal healing instead.

When Jesus explained to the woman that this living water would satisfy her thirst forever, the woman immediately asked Jesus for some. She was still thinking literally, however. Silently she may have thought, 'With this water I won't have to lug these heavy buckets to the well every day. What a relief it will be to avoid the stares and insults of the people at midday!' Jesus, realizing that something was standing between this woman and the living water she now sought, pressed further.

"*Go, get your husband, and come back here.*" Jesus urged. This order forces the woman to make a critical choice. She could try to elude the command and try to conceal her reputation, or she could reveal the truth to this curious stranger. I have a hunch that this woman may have told lies in her past, and been caught in some lies and found it had not paid off, for on this day she answers Jesus truthfully and without hesitation. Bravely, she chose the truth. "*I don't have a husband.*" She replied. That is all the truth she can bear to tell.

There is something about the 'presence of God' that opens the door for confession. When the holiness of God confronts us, we suddenly see ourselves as God sees us. Jesus accepted the woman's confession of truth and

supplied the rest of the details of her story. He knew that she had had five husbands already, and that the man she was now with was not her husband.

The Samaritan woman later reacts by racing through the streets, amazed at how Jesus had told her everything she had done. If Jesus had merely picked up commonly known information about this woman from the gossip circles, she would not have been amazed.

A certain level of intimacy and trust had developed between the Samaritan woman and Jesus by this point in their conversation. This may be what led to her further inquiry about worship. Something significant was happening.

Jesus took this opportunity to draw the woman inside another spiritual truth: the time has come “when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth.” In other words, when it comes to worship, the attention should not be on the physical location. The Jews believed the Temple at Jerusalem to be the proper place for worship; the Samaritans felt just as strongly that the proper place for worship was Mount Gerizim. But Jesus knew that no physical location on earth could serve God’s eternal purpose. Jesus was introducing a radically new idea that true worship could take place only within one’s heart.

Truth in this case refers to that which is morally true, genuine, and real. The implication is that true worship takes place when we dare to be completely honest with God. We must offer our inner spirit to God in honest admission of our transgressions, as the Samaritan woman did. We must be genuine in character and seek the Lord’s help in shaping our ethical integrity.

The woman replied, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one who is called the Christ. When he comes, he will teach everything to us." She is now sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with Jesus Christ. Her faith is growing in these moments and she is about to be rewarded with Jesus’ next words. He said to her, "I Am—the one who speaks with you."

The Samaritan woman, not a Jew, has just become the first one that Jesus admits to that he is the Messiah. Not even the disciples have heard him say this. They are asked instead by Jesus “Who do people say I am?” and “Who do you say I am?” We don’t even know the name of the Samaritan woman, she isn’t even a follower of Christ until this conversation, yet she is the one that is told first that Jesus is the ‘I AM.’

The Samaritan woman’s truthful encounter with Jesus liberated her spiritually and morally. As she truthfully trusted in Christ, the Lord drew her into deeper encounters with spiritual truth. In the process, the Samaritan’s life was changed. She came to understand that Jesus was more than a mere prophet; he was the long awaited Messiah! In her excitement, she, a woman without a husband rushed into public – the religious men’s domain– and spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

This is what happens when we worship God in spirit and in truth. The freeing power of God’s truth bubbles up in our hearts and inspired us to share the good news. The dynamic power of God’s truth enables us to overcome barriers that once restricted us. Our willingness to be truthful to God releases God’s liberating power to transform our lives and our communities. And when we choose to be honest to God, the benefits to ourselves and to the kingdom of God are tremendous.

An ethics professor once asked his class if they always wanted to know the truth about themselves – good or bad; how would you respond to that question? When people share honest criticism with you, how are you likely to respond? Does anything prevent you from honest dialogue with God? To what extent do you invite the Lord into your discussions about your problems? This week, I invite you to ask God to help you explore the freeing power of truth to strengthen your relationships with God and with others and to promote your spiritual growth.