

John 4:5-42 – Lent III

Earlier this week, fellow Ascension member, Andrew Ault, shared an article with me that detailed new data released by the Pew Research Center this year. Pew Research recently surveyed people in 25 countries on how they felt about their fellow countrypeople. Specifically, Pew sought to gauge how people felt about the ethics and morals of their fellow citizens, whether they viewed the people around them as essentially good or essentially bad. Of the 25 countries surveyed, Americans were the most likely to view our fellow countrypeople as either somewhat or just plain bad. In fact, America was the *only* country surveyed wherein a majority of the people questioned viewed their fellow citizens as morally and ethically bad. A full 53% of us think that the other people in our country are more bad than good.

Though I'm not sure how surprised I was by the data, I was and am so disheartened by it. It is an incredibly sad statistic that more than half of Americans believe that other Americans are morally and ethically bankrupt. Friends, I don't have to tell you how divided our country is right now. We are living through a time of deep mistrust in each other and in our institutions. Less and less people are belonging to community organizations and organized religions; less and less people feel connected to their neighbors and their communities. A recent article from the Harvard Center for Public Leadership found that 12% of U.S. adults say they have no close friends – not a small amount, not one or two, not “not as many as I would like,” but *zero close friends*.

All of this loneliness and isolation, all of this retreating from life together is, of course, playing out in a backdrop of loud societal anger and resentment. A lot of people in positions of power and trust, people in our newsfeeds and on our televisions, have figured out that it is easier to harness anger and division than it is to bring people together.

Being people of faith, being people who are serious about loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves is no easy feat in a time so deeply mired in distrust and disconnectedness. Our Gospels don't tell us that we have to always agree with each other, but Jesus is certainly clear that anyone who wants to follow him should certainly be about the business of learning to love other people, perhaps even and especially when we do not agree with them. Learning to be a force of love in a time where hate seems to have the upper hand matters. It matters how we treat each other. It matters how we think about each other. It matters how and if we chose to pray for each other, especially people that we may not agree with or may not even like. We do not need to excuse or ignore cruel or malicious behavior in the world around us – on that God is clear. But even as we work for justice in an often deeply unjust world, we must also consider how we are talking and thinking about our fellow human beings.

Unfortunately, none of this is new. People have been fighting, arguing, and distancing themselves from each other from virtually the beginning of time. The good news is that our Gospels and Jesus himself will speak to this division repeatedly. Jesus's teachings weren't spoken or limited to a perfect world but to the one we actually inhabit. Central to today's Gospel reading is the role of deep, deep communal division between the Jews and the Samaritans. Theirs was a feud that has stretched back for hundreds of years. Though they shared common ancestry and heritage, Jews and Samaritans had diverged in practice and beliefs over the centuries, resulting in intense dislike and conflict between the two groups. By Jesus's time, Jews and Samaritans had very little in common, shared an open animosity, and stayed well away from each as a rule.

This is the cultural backdrop of ongoing tension and controversy in which the actions of today's Gospel reading take place. Jesus, in stopping to talk to a Samaritan woman, violates a bevy of norms. He's not only Jewish talking to a Samaritan, he's a man talking, alone, with a woman. So many assumptions could be made by both Jesus and the woman about the other, so many unkind, loaded, uncharitable thoughts they could have shared about each other, that their tentative conversation could have been doomed from the start. Instead hatred or distrust, both choose to approach the other with openness, perhaps with some caution, but with genuine curiosity and a willingness to be in conversation, to be in the same space as someone from a group typically believed to be opposed to their own, and in doing so, something miraculous takes place.

This woman, whose name history has never recorded, becomes a timeless example of a faithful follower of God. She is openhearted and openminded, willing to engage with Jesus in humility. She is willing to choose to believe Jesus can be an agent of good even though the things she has learned and been taught about people like him have likely always been bad. Jesus issues the invitation to connection, and she chooses to accept, chooses to see him for who he is and not what others have told her he and his people would be like. In staying openhearted, she allows a miraculous connection to take place, not simply between two feuding and opposed people, but between humanity and God. In allowing herself to speak and contend with Jesus, she becomes one of the first people in John's Gospel to hear Jesus' self-revelation of his Messiahship. She, a Samaritan woman, becomes one of the first people that will hear Jesus claim that he is the long-awaited Christ.

What's even better, this woman doesn't allow this incredible interaction to start and end with herself. She leaves Jesus at the well to and runs to tell her fellow townspeople about her conversation with Jesus. She runs to her own community of Samaritans and uses her lack of prejudice or hatred to convince others to come closer to Jesus. Her inquiring, kind, open heart allows her to see Jesus for who he is, but, even better, it becomes the means by which others will also receive an invitation to Christ. Come and see, she says. Come and see if this man who had the courage and love to speak with her could indeed be the Messiah.

This woman chooses kindness over anger, curiosity over prejudice, openness over distrust. Ultimately, this woman chooses love over hate, and in doing so, brings a whole community to the one thing that has the power to connect all humanity – the love of God found in Christ Jesus. Our Gospels are full of calls from Jesus to love. Love your neighbor, self, and God, Jesus says. Love your enemies. As we heard in last week's Gospel, love is the reason for all of this. The reason we are sitting here, two thousand years later, telling the story of Jesus Christ, is because God loves us, so, so very much. Boundless love, depthless love, grace-filled love. Love is the way people will know we are followers of God, not because loving others is easy. Jesus isn't naïve. Loving people, especially those with whom we disagree or have little in common with, takes intentionality, trust, and the sincere conviction that the person we're endeavoring to love also a beloved child of God, even and especially when it's difficult for us to remember that.

God invites us to love without hesitation, without reserve, without exception because God knows how hard love can be. What's worse, God also knows how easy and how tempting hate can be for us. Hate takes only a very little space to get to get rooted in our hearts, and once it

does, it can be so very hard for us to stop letting hate color our lives, our choices, our interactions with each other.

Jesus invites us to choose love, to choose to be agents of love, kindness, goodness, justice, and mercy in a world that seems to have forgotten that those good things exist and are so worth pursuing. Martin Luther King, Jr. leaned into this call to love in a broken world, reminding us that “hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.” We cannot hope to heal this broken, hurting world, we cannot hope to be the hands and feet of Christ, if we do not keep choosing love.

Love is an invitation. Just as Jesus invited the Samaritan woman, a perceived enemy of his people, into conversation, just as the woman invited her fellow townspeople to come and see this strange man for themselves, we too are invited to choose love, and we are called to invite others into love, too. Invite people to come and see and feel the love of Christ which changed the course of history all those years ago. Come and remember that we were made by and for and in love. God made us simply because God had so much love and wanted someone to share that love with. There is so much joy in simply receiving God’s love and learning to share that love with the world. When we settle in God’s love, we can finally stop seeing others through eyes of distrust, suspicious, and hate. In learning to love, we, with God’s help, can make the world that much more lovely.