An Unexpected Welcome

A reflection for Centennial United Church, Stayner · Nov 15, 2026 by David Graham

John 4:4–42

Good morning

Thank you for inviting Jim and me to share this morning with you. This is your day, Centennial, and we are honoured to share in its joy.

In September, Jim and I made our covenant with each other, surrounded by our chosen family. There is a particular joy when something long hoped for and long worked for is finally named and celebrated. This morning is that day for you.

It has been my privilege to walk beside you as your Program Coordinator mid-way through the Affirming process. This partnership does not end with a certificate. I am still here, and still walking with you.

Jennifer tells me you have just begun a sermon series on the Unexpected Jesus, inspired by Sarah Bessey. It is a fitting companion for today, because Jesus kept showing up in places no one expected, with people no one expected, offering a welcome no one expected.

And this morning's story may be the most unexpected of them all.

He had to go through Samaria

In this morning's reading, John tells us that Jesus "had to go through Samaria."

He did not, actually. Not geographically. Many faithful travellers took the long way around precisely to avoid Samaria. Jews and Samaritans had centuries of suspicion between them.

So, when John says Jesus *had* to go through Samaria, I do not think he is talking about a map. I think he is talking about a calling. There was someone there Jesus needed to meet.

He arrives at Jacob's well at noon, in the heat of the day. He is tired. He sits down. And a woman comes to draw water, alone.

We are not told why she comes at noon, when water was usually drawn in the cool of the morning, together with the other women of the village. Many have wondered whether it was easier to be alone than to be looked at.

I know something about that. I suspect some of you do too.

Jesus speaks first. "Give me a drink." And the woman is astonished. *You are a Jew. I am a Samaritan, and a woman. Why are you asking me?*

That question is the beginning of everything. Why would he speak to me? Why would he want what I have to give?

Fully known, and not turned away

This woman has often been preached about unkindly. Five husbands, and the man she lives with now is not her husband. For generations that line has painted her as a woman of questionable morals.

But the text never says that. In her world, a woman could not divorce her husband. She could be widowed, cast aside, or passed from brother to brother. Hers is very likely a story of loss, and of being at the mercy of other people's choices.

And notice what Jesus does. He names the truth of her life, and then he keeps talking to her. He does not shame her. He does not tell her to come back once she has sorted herself out. It is the longest conversation with any one person recorded in the Gospels, and she is the first person in John's Gospel to whom Jesus plainly says, *I am he*.

When she runs back to her village, what does she say? "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done."

It is a remarkable thing to say with joy. She has been fully known, and she has not been turned away. That is what makes her run.

For much of my life, I did not believe that could be true for me. I believed I needed to be corrected before I could be fully loved, by God or by the church. I spent years performing a life that looked the way I thought it was supposed to look, sure that if I were truly known, I would be sent away.

It took me a long time to discover that I was not a mistake to be fixed. I was created. Known, and loved, and invited to drink.

That is what the word *Affirming* means. It says to every person who has come to the well alone, at noon, hoping not to be seen: *You are known here. And you are welcome here*.

Living water, and no one left out

Jesus tells her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." The water he gives becomes in them "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Notice the word *everyone*. Not everyone from the right people, or the right mountain, or whose life has gone according to plan. Everyone.

Living water, in Jesus' day, meant flowing water. Not water sitting still in a cistern, but water that moves and goes where it is needed. Living water reaches.

Indigenous peoples have long understood how water and life move together. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Potawatomi botanist and writer, tells of pecan groves whose roots share water and nourishment through underground threads of fungus. A tree with more shares with a tree with less. Her teaching is simple and profound: "All flourishing is mutual."

That is the Kin-dom of God. Not a well with a lock on it. Not water rationed out to those who qualify. A spring that keeps rising and a network of roots that keeps sharing, until no one is left thirsty.

When the woman raises the old dividing question of where people ought to worship, Jesus answers that true worshippers will worship in spirit and in truth. The dividing lines she has lived with are not the lines God draws.

Belonging does not wait for understanding

When the disciples return with lunch, John says they were astonished that Jesus was speaking with a woman. They do not understand. But they stay.

I find great hope in that. Jesus does not wait for everyone to understand before he widens the circle.

Jim and I met through Generous Space, a community for queer people exploring faith and identity. You did not have to be understood to be welcomed. Belonging does not wait for understanding. If it did, none of us would ever be loved. And, if we're honest, there are days we do not fully understand ourselves.

Some tables in my own life have not made room for who I am and for the man I love, and that has hurt. But I have also found tables I never expected: chosen family, friends who celebrate rather than tolerate, and churches like this one.

The cord of three strands

At our covenant ceremony, Jim and I braided a cord of three strands: purple for me, aqua for Jim, and gold woven between us and through us. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Two strands can pull apart; the third holds them together. For us, that gold strand is God's love.

Congregations are like that too. A church is not strong because everyone agrees or everyone is the same. It is strong because something is woven through all of it: love that refuses to let go.

Becoming Affirming is not adding a new strand. It is recognizing strands that were always there: the 2S and LGBTQIA+ people who may have been or are part of this congregation, sometimes quietly, sometimes at great cost, sometimes waiting to see whether it was safe to be fully known. And it is saying clearly that the gold thread runs through them too.

She left her water jar

There is one small detail in this story that I love. When the woman runs back to town, she leaves her water jar behind.

She came to the well for water. She leaves without it, because she has found something she cannot keep to herself. The woman who came alone at noon, hoping not to be seen, runs into the middle of the village and tells everyone. *Come and see.*

Because of her, the Samaritans ask Jesus to stay, and he does: two days in a Samaritan town, eating at Samaritan tables. Many come to believe, and they tell her, "We have heard for ourselves."

That is the harvest Jesus speaks of. The disciples had walked right through those ripe fields on the way to buy lunch, and had not seen it.

Even from a distance, I have seen the harvest happen here on Centennial's Affirming journey.

Not every conversation was easy, I suspect. Some arrive quickly, some slowly and carefully, and some are still on the way. Their arrival is no less real for taking time. Living water makes room for all of that.

And the presentation of your certificate is not a finish line. It is more like that water jar left at the well, a sign that something has happened that you cannot keep to yourselves.

Being Affirming is something you will keep choosing. You will choose it when someone new walks in and you learn their name. You will choose it when a young person here begins to wonder who they are, and discovers this church is a safe place to wonder. And you will choose it when it costs you something.

The prophet Micah's words have guided me for a long time: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. They are not a destination. They are a way of walking.

A place at the well, a place at the table

A well, in the ancient world, was where people met. Strangers became neighbours there. It was, in a way, a table. **And it was at a well that Jesus offered one of his most unexpected welcomes.**

The table of Christ holds that same possibility. It is where we are fed, where we are known, and where we remember that we belong to each other. We do not come because we have earned our place. We come because we have been invited. All of us.

That is **the unexpected welcome** an Affirming Congregation **offers** to someone walking through its doors for the first time: There is room for you here. Not a corner, not a back pew, not a seat you have to earn. A place at the table. A drink from the well that never runs dry.

Come and see

Somewhere today there is someone who has been hurt by the church and has almost given up, who has learned to come to the well at noon, alone, **expecting no welcome at all.** Someday they may drive past Centennial or look you up online, see that word, Affirming, and decide to try one more time. You may never know their name before they walk in. But you have already made a place for them.

The unexpected Jesus went through Samaria because there was someone there he did not want to miss. He still does. And this morning, Centennial, you have said that you will go that way too.

Everyone is invited to drink. No one is left out. **That is the unexpected welcome at the well.**

The invitation continues.

And none of us walking it alone.