

Six Practices That Grow Faith: WORSHIP

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John 4:19-26

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A Jewish man walks into a bar and asks for a drink. Nah, that's not how the story goes—that was my intrusive thought running ahead of me. A Jewish man walks up to this Samaritan woman who is drawing water from a well on a hot summer day and asks for a drink—since he's got nothing to draw it up with. As that cool water runs down his chin and through his parched lips, and over a dry tongue and down a grateful esophagus they get to talking about how we need to keep drinking water because it only satisfies our momentary thirst. And then this man says that he has some special water, living water, that will quench the deeper longing of our hearts and lives. If you drink *this* water, you'll never thirst again. If you drink *this* metaphorical water, it will become an ever flowing spring inside you and sustain you *and* those you love.

“Well, I'll take some of that!” she says. “It's yours,” he says, and while I sit here and re-hydrate, “go get your husband and come back” he says. Not only you, but your family, or those closest to you, should be the first to benefit from this water of life that I've offered, he seems to say.

Here's where things get weird. It was already strange enough that he was actually talking to her during this time in history when a Jewish man wouldn't have even talked to his *wife* in public. But everything about this Jewish man seemed so not like other men she'd known. And she'd known a few, if you know what I mean. Maybe it was the unassuming tone when he had asked for a drink, not demanding or demeaning in any way. But as an equal. So she takes a chance..

“Well, I don't technically have a husband”, she said, maybe looking at the ground. “This will be the end of this conversation for sure”, she may have thought. But, she looks up into a face full of kindness and understanding.

“Technically, you’ve had 5 husbands”, he says with a soft and gentle voice, “and the man you are with now is not your husband”.

Her first reaction would have been “How did he know that?” This man was no ordinary dude. “A prophet? Definitely a prophet. Wait. This guy must know *everything* about me!”

As commentator and theologian Kenneth Bailey writes, “The water of life was flowing over her, and, like the flowing water of a stream that exposes the roots of a tree growing on its banks, her roots were exposed.” Embarrassed at the unexpected exposure, she did what we often do, she changed the subject.

What she *said* was, “I see that you are a prophet V19. Where is the proper place to worship? Our fathers say this Mount Gerizim. Yours say Jerusalem. Which is it?” Just a small debate that had been going on for 500 years.

Mt Gerizim was where it is believed that Noah’s ark landed after the floodwater receded, and the place where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac. The Jews believed the Shekinah, the divine presence of God to be found most fully in Mt Zion, and the temple in Jerusalem, of course.

Just a small little question to deflect the focus off of herself. Who’s to blame her? And this Jewish man, who we know is ____ (kids? Do you know who this Jewish man was?) Jesus, of course! Does he call her out for changing the subject? No. He responds to her question not only in a way that elevates her status as a person, he uses her question to deliver something so amazing that would forever change how we live and understand and experience God.

“Woman” he says. Kids, try calling your mom “Woman” and see how that goes! You might want to have an escape route when you do that. I tried saying ‘Woman, what’s for dinner?’ once when I was a kid. My mom threatened to make me cook my own dinner!

Calling her “woman” sounds demeaning, but he is actually saying that he is intentionally choosing her, a Samaritan—woman no less—to break the news of a new and profound theological truth to. Woman, the time is coming, and is now here, when you won’t necessarily worship in either place!

Wait. What? Neither place? Then where? “The time is coming and is now here, when true worshippers will worship in spirit and in truth.” Okay. But where? How? What does this mean?

“God is seeking out and calling out true worshippers from *within their own hearts*. God is spirit, and those who worship God worship God in spirit and truth”. The place won’t be that important since God is everywhere! (Holy Spirit, foreshadow of doctrine of the trinity).

It’s hard to convey just how huge this statement would have been, especially for Jewish folks. Kenneth Bailey calls this a de-Zionizing of the faith tradition and its absolute connection to geographical location.

The Jews had grown up with stories of how they carried the ark of the covenant into battle, and if they had the ark, they won. If they did not, they lost. The Jordan River stopped for the priests carrying the ark so they could walk through the riverbed on dry ground. The ark, the portable tabernacle, and then the temple were paramount. They had songs of going up the mountain of God in Zion (we still have a song “we’re marching to Zion” in our hymnal). And Jesus says true worship is becoming about spirit and truth, not geographical location.

Ok, time out. We haven’t even defined what we mean by worship. We use that word to describe our Sunday morning gathering time. You are a part of a worship service right now. But what actually does worship mean? To honor or give reverence for a divine being or supernatural power says Merriam-Webster.

Kind of like what was happening right then and there between Jesus and this woman of Samaria. Where you stand before God or divinity with

nothing to hide. As we express awe and wonder and reverence to God we also experience a reverence in the sense of experiencing our own self-worth being lifted. We remember that we are valuable. The shame or guilt that we hide behind or our pride that covers it over that we hold so tightly—slips aside or falls through our fingers. We give reverence, we receive reverence. And we are changed. Our ego-driven motives become clear, our disappointments, our regrets are slowly transformed. Or even instantly transformed, sometimes.

This woman almost seems to sigh deeply. This almost seems too simple! “I know that when the messiah comes, he will explain all of this.”

You’re talking to him, Jesus says. “I AM—the one who speaks to you”. The I AM that appears here in the Greek text of John is the exact phrase that is used in the Greek OT that translated the Hebrew of what God said to Moses at the burning bush. Remember, Moses says to God in the burning bush—Tell them I AM sent you. This I AM is the first of 8 I AM statements that Jesus makes in the gospel of John. I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the true and living way. I am the vine

Jesus' very first proclamation of his I AM-ness has just been given to this Samaritan woman with negative status according to Jews, and even without status in her community. Isn't that so like God? Even in the *proclamation* of God doing a new thing, Jesus elevates someone overlooked by everyone else, reaches past her shame and self-loathing. She ran into town and proclaimed to everyone that would listen, “I think I just met the Christ! The Jewish Messiah. He knew everything about me and yet he spoke to me in, in..well, just Come see!” And come they did. She becomes, as Kenneth Bailey says, the first woman preacher!

So we have the first description of worship in the new plan of God incarnate. True worship is about encountering God, within. When we notice a colorful sunrise or breathtaking sunset and pause a moment and breathe a deep “wow, thank you”, we’re worshipping in spirit and truth.

When we read poetry or hear a piece of music or view art that moves us and cuts through the false narratives we may have believed about ourselves and our world and we marvel at the gift of words and sounds and meaning and colors and how they summon up our emotions and memories and longings and smells and we breathe a deep ‘thank you, God for the gift of language and words and colors’ we’re worshipping. When we complete a hard task, and we pause to say “thank you God, for that task completed”—that’s worship in spirit and truth. When we fail miserably at something, or experience disappointment, yet we get up, shake off the dust and look up and say, “glad that’s over”, that’s worship in spirit and truth.

These are just a few examples of worship. You each have your own examples. Worship is a practice just like these other 5. And just like anything we practice, we get better at it. How do we practice worship? It’s not like we’re going to keep bumping into a Jewish man every time we go to the water fountain and then having a deep conversation about living water springing up within us!

I encourage you to choose something to use as a reminder or summons to worship. When you see a deer. The flash of a red bird. When you sit down to eat. When you walk to the mailbox. Or see a sunset, or sunrise. Or when you’re thirsty, and you find water and let that cool water soothe and quench and wash over you from within..

There’s one final example of worship that we haven’t talked about. I stated earlier that worship is also what we call this time we are having right now. Is getting up every Sunday morning and coming to Alexanderwohl or wherever you typically attend a practice of worship? Absolutely! And if you have been practicing worship through the week, you will be in good spiritual shape to where you will find yourself “in spirit and truth” in our corporate singing, praying, sharing, caring, giving, hearing, and sending. Our combined worship has power that energizes our individual worship practice. And vice-versa. Let’s keep practicing worship in spirit and truth. Amen?

Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Intervarsity Press, 2008), pp. 206-216

Benediction: Having kept the practice of worship together this morning where we bear our own and each other's burdens, love one another through hard things, go now, keeping our practice of worship this week in spirit and in truth. And may the peace of Christ, the Love of God, and the living water of the Holy Spirit live in and through and among you until we meet again. AMEN!