

**“Encountering Jesus: Finding Purpose”**

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: February 25, 2024



So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to 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 that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him.

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It took me a number of years to become aware of it – and I would say that I’m probably still only *partly* aware of it – but I have discovered that when you are a six-foot-five middle-aged white guy with, we’ll generously call it, greying temples and thinning hair...people make some assumptions about you.

One of those assumptions that people make is that I know what I’m talking about. There are plenty of people who can rightly challenge that assumption based on plenty of data points that would suggest otherwise – but most of the time when you look like me people give you the benefit of the doubt.

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A lot of times people think I'm in charge. People assume that I'm halfway smart. I think, generally, people assume that I've got my life together and that this life is pretty great.

Turns out – a lot of times life is pretty great for people who others assume have a life that is pretty great.

Almost everywhere I go, I find that people make assumptions that are...generally...positive.

But there was this one time – about a year ago – when I had a different experience. I was doing a wedding for some church members that was offsite in an art gallery in South End. If you are watching our broadcast today – and you're not from Charlotte – South End is an old neighborhood in the city...about two miles from the church...that used to be home to mills and mill-houses. Now it is home to night life, good food, breweries, new apartment complexes where the average age is about half of my 47 years, and lots and lots of tattoos.

So, there I was – in South End – after the wedding rehearsal, when had the bright idea to text my bride and tell her I was going to bring home some food from a place I had read about online. I ordered the food ahead of time, and walked in the restaurant to pick it up. When I did – it was like the record player skipped. People stared at me – and I could almost feel them making assumptions – but not in the way I was accustomed. I was – after all – wearing khakis...and penny loafers...and a button-down which was not only not ripped, but tucked in. It was like I was an alien – an intruder. The people staring at me didn't articulate their assumptions out loud of course, but I could feel them: Out of touch, privileged, old fashioned. All those things were probably true (!!), but for someone who was used to being given the benefit of the doubt – it was a strange and new feeling for me to be looked at with disdain...not a feeling I particularly enjoyed.

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If you have heard this morning's Scripture before about the woman at the well, my guess is that you may have some assumptions.

She's had five husbands, after all.

She's at the well about noon – the hottest time of the day – which also happens to be when no one else is around, so it is the most anonymous time of the day, too.

And she's a Samaritan – a reminder from Sunday School that Samaritans were rivals with the Jews of Jesus's day...and not ones who were held in high esteem.

Suffice it to say that when this woman walked into a room or a crowd, people were likely not giving her the benefit of the doubt. She was likely VERY used to being looked at with disdain. Indeed, it likely defined her.

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A preacher-friend of mine<sup>1</sup> connects this morning’s Scripture to the work of a Jewish philosopher named Martin Buber. Buber believed human beings find meaning (and purpose) in relationship.

My preacher-friend summarizes it well: “In Buber’s philosophy, humans have a “two-fold attitude” as he put it: *I-It*, and *I-Thou*.

The “I-it” attitude refers to the world of experience. He writes, “I perceive something. I sense something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something.”<sup>2</sup> The I-it relationship is centered in me, in my experience of the other. It objectifies the other from “an I” into “an it.”

“*I-Thou*” describes a different world; the world of relationship. In this world, I do not objectify you by making you my experience of you. I do not make you an “it.” I acknowledge relationship with you. In the “*I-Thou*” attitude I can only understand my life’s meaning in relationship with you. Buber takes it even deeper to say that when I am in relationship with you and you with me, in that relationship we experience the Divine, the ultimate “*Thou*.”

In this morning’s Scripture – this conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well (which, by the way, is the longest single conversation that Jesus has with anyone in the gospels) – in this morning’s Scripture we see Buber’s two-fold attitude on display – and we see the stark difference between an “I-It” and an “I-Thou.”

The Samaritan woman is the ultimate “It” of Jesus’s day for reasons we’ve already mentioned: She’s a woman, she’s had five husbands, she’s a Samaritan.

But more than just in Jesus’s day, the Samaritan Woman has been objectified as an “It” throughout history. If you had assumptions about this woman, they were likely shaped because of the way this story has been interpreted over the years. Suffice it to say those interpretations have not been kind.

What is interesting, though – if you would permit your preacher to geek-out for a minute – is the *reason* this Samaritan woman might have had those five marriages. We likely assume it had something to do with promiscuity. In truth, women who commit infidelity in Jesus’s day would be severely punished – not remarried. And, in fact, women in that day were not permitted to divorce, either. Far from it being her choice, what is more likely is that this woman had been married five times because she was objectified and treated as property in a patriarchal system. She may have been an “It” in each of her marriages – and, sadly, an “It” because of her marriages.

Jesus doesn’t see her that way.

Jesus initiates the conversation with the woman from a place of need – a place of shared humanity: As someone who is thirsty and in need of water.

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<sup>1</sup> The right Reverend Doctor Joe Clifford, Senior Pastor at Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte and fellow member of The Well preaching cohort (this sermon is greatly helped by Joe’s work on this text from the 2019 edition of The Well).

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The woman resists – she’s used to staying in the role as an “It” – “how is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

But Jesus persists in engaging her as a person and not an object.

They begin by talking about what all humans need – living water.

Then they talk about worship – and where to worship – and just before that turns into an academic exercise, Jesus reminds the woman that worshipping God is not about a particular place, but that it is about a relationship: that we “worship in spirit and truth.”

Then Jesus risks vulnerability by sharing the truth that he is the Messiah.

And the woman – before her encounter with Jesus – an invisible and ostracized member of the community, then drops her water jar to run into the center of the city testifying to what she had experienced.

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Sometimes, I think, we might read this story about Jesus and the woman at the well as a story about redemption that can come after forgiveness. But that assumes the woman did something wrong.

What this story shows is the transformation that comes from being seen.

How much it matters to know that you are a “Thou” and not an “It.”

And, particularly, to know that the Messiah sees you that way.

We live in a world that too often does a really good job of turning “Thous” into “Its.”

Immigrants. Republicans. Democrats. Palestinians. Jews. Evangelicals. Progressives. Popular kids. Nerds. The list goes on.

It’s easier to objectify the other, isn’t it?

Simpler to paint with a broad brush.

Allow our assumptions to turn into opinions.

Allow our opinions to be hardened into convictions.

Allow our convictions to render the world into “our people” and those who are expendable.

And, I don’t know about you, but that can feel overwhelming and without much hope.

But, maybe, like the story we read about this morning, it starts with a conversation. A conversation that takes place across the lines of difference that we’ve allowed to shape the people-scape of our world.

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Maybe it starts when those of us who know that life is about relationships – and who know that God sees each and every person as a precious “Thou” – maybe it starts when we take the initiative...and the time...to meet “an other” on a human level. To see them – and to share with them the gift of being seen.

To do so might lead to some sort of transformation – for the other, and for us.

And it would point to the One who yearns for those created in God’s image to turn from our selfish pursuits – toward one another – where our true purpose is to be found.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.