

Look Again!

John 4:5-42

Through Jesus, we come to see ourselves, others, and God in a whole new way!

One of the hardest things to do is to acknowledge that the way we have always thought about something has not been accurate. I'd never dreamed of having to cancel worship because of a global pandemic. Older people I've talked to who've seen it all, report that they've never seen anything like this. Who'd have ever thought that the ACC tournament, the NCAA tournament, the NBA and NHL seasons would be canceled, that Spring training would be canceled, that the Pope's plans for Holy Week celebrations would be canceled?

When something completely unexpected or previously not experienced occurs, scientists would say we have to adjust our paradigm, our worldview, to make room for this new information.

A paradigm is simply a pattern that we believe to be a trustworthy way of looking at the world and interpreting our human experience.

For instance, for thousands of years, scientists held a geo-centric model or paradigm of the universe. That is, they believed that the earth was at the center of the universe. That model or paradigm had to be discarded when people like Galileo, Copernicus, and Kepler proved that this Ptolemaic model was wrong. Rather, the sun was the center of things. You'd think such a discovery would be liberating, but instead it was met with great resistance, especially by the church. For you see, the church believed that human beings and their home, planet earth, were the center of God's creation and the idea that that was not the case was so threatening that the church put people like Galileo on trial to force them to recant their new ways of thinking. Galileo would not and spent the latter years of his life under house arrest for his new, revolutionary way of looking at the universe.

Steven Covey, well-known for his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, has a wonderful example of a paradigm shift: he was traveling in a subway, a man gets in with his two sons, the sons are running all over the place bothering the people, this continues, so he finally gets irritated enough to ask the father why he doesn't do something to control his kids. The father replies, "We just got back from the hospital where their mother died. I don't know how to handle it and I guess they don't either."

Suddenly you see the everything differently. That is the power of a paradigm shift. They are the same kids yelling and screaming in the subway, but you look at them and understand them in a different way.

Our behavior often results from our paradigms of the way we believe the world works.

We have spiritual paradigms, maps we might call them. Sometimes they are accurate. Sometimes they prove themselves to be misleading and in need of transformation. If Jesus was

about anything, he was about challenging old paradigms of judgment with new paradigms of grace.

If the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well tells us anything, it tells us that Jesus was in the business of changing people's views about the spiritual universe in which they lived. He was about the business of changing the way people looked at things. And just as people like Galileo experienced great resistance to their new ideas, so Jesus experienced the resistance of those whose comfortable perspectives he challenged.

One of the paradigms Jesus comes to change is the way we look at ourselves. How do you look at yourself? Do you see yourself as someone who is always on top of things, never in need of help or assistance, never guilty of making a bad decision, never guilty of sin?

Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman who'd come to draw water at 12 noon. She apparently was ashamed, or she'd have not chosen an hour to draw water at which she'd been alone. Jesus asks her for water, when he is the one who has living water to offer her. She is astounded that he a man would speak to her with respect. That itself was forbidden in Jewish circles. Even rabbis would not speak to their wives in public.

She is astounded that he, a Jew, would speak to her with respect, rather than contempt and derision. For the Jews and Samaritans had a long, acrimonious history. Dating back to 722 BC when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom, carried Jews off into captivity and then returned many of them, sometime later, after the land had been populated by Babylonians. The Samaritans were the result of those intermarriage and were looked at by Jews as inferior. And their worship practices were substandard—they saw Mt. Gerizim rather than the temple as the holy place where God was present. The Samaritans, on the other hand, saw themselves as true Jews. In their minds, they had nothing to apologize for or feel inferior about.

Jesus spoke to a woman, a Samaritan woman. And more than that, according to his tradition's classifications for people, this Samaritan woman was a sinner. She'd married a number of times and lived with a man who was not her husband. Intuitively or supernaturally, Jesus sensed that this woman had been searching for something for a long time but never found anything to satisfy her deepest longings. Jesus does not attack her with condemnation; rather he gently leads her to confess to herself and to him the state of her life.

Jesus says he can give her living water—something welling up within her—the power and presence of God's spirit—that will satisfy her at a deep level. Jesus is in fact, showing her that she is someone loved by God, someone accepted by God, someone worthy of receiving the life-transforming gift of God's grace.

She'd come to the well feeling empty, unworthy, shameful—she left able to think about herself in a whole new way—as someone God loved, as someone who could make a new start, as someone who had discovered the key to life's deepest satisfaction.

How do you see yourself? Do you see yourself as a successful, self-sufficient person who has no need of God's help? That'll last until you run into something bigger than yourself—bigger than your strength, intelligence, or control. Do you see yourself as someone who is unworthy of God's mercy and grace, as someone who destined to live an empty, unfulfilled, unhappy life? Do you see yourself as someone who is destined to carry a burden of shame over past mistakes and failures? Let yourself have a conversation with Jesus like the Samaritan woman did. Jesus can help you see yourself as one he loves, one he forgives, one he gently corrects, one to whom he wants to give the living water that satisfies the deepest longings of your soul.

Jesus also changes the way people see others. The disciples have gone into town while Jesus is engaged in this conversation with the Samaritan woman. They come back and are taken back to find their good Jewish teacher talking in the light of day with this Samaritan woman who, in their eyes, is a sinner. They could not imagine that Jesus would have violated that many rules of social and religious etiquette. It was not proper. God loved Jews more than Samaritans, men more than women, the righteous more than sinners—at least in their book.

But if Jesus really was a teacher from God to be trusted, then he must be showing them with some accuracy not only how he looked at people others had written off or despised, but how God looked at them. These Samaritans, this woman, this sinful woman, were equally loved by God as any good Jewish Pharisee.

Have you had that experience? Have you ever been forced to rethink the way you thought about some person or some group of people? Have you ever been challenged to let go of some stereotype or prejudice, some paradigm that just didn't fit into the way you come to see God looks at people?

Following Jesus is hard because he's always leading us to see people who make us uncomfortable in a whole new light.

You know, as I've studied this passage this week, I've realized that the way many of us have been conditioned to look at the Samaritan woman is probably not right. We hear she's been married four times, living with a man not her husband, and we immediately assume some things about her. What do we assume? Even older commentaries lead us into those assumptions—you've already heard me refer to her as a sinner, or at least that's how the disciples probably thought of her. When you hear about her history, you almost automatically assume she's promiscuous. But nowhere in the text is that supported. Women had very little choice in marriage in Jesus' day, and very little standing apart from a man if they weren't married. Who's to say previous husbands hadn't died? And as one writer speculates, perhaps the man she was with the day she met Jesus could have possibly been obligated to marry her according to laws of levirate marriage, you know where a brother takes the widow of her deceased husband so that the dead brother's legacy lives on. And who's to say that the woman was with this particular man willingly. We've become acutely aware in the last few years of how our male-dominated world often creates a culture of harassment and intimidation for women. I have come to think that this

woman was a woman of deep faith who'd experienced a lot of bad luck and heartache in her life. Do you see how easy it is to see others in the wrong light altogether?

Jesus never condemns the woman. In fact, one way to look at this text is to contrast it with the passage from last week about Nicodemus. Nicodemus is afraid and encounters Jesus at night. The woman speaks to him at high noon. Nicodemus cannot seem to grasp Jesus' metaphor about the spiritual life of being born anew. The Samaritan woman is theologically astute. Some of us have been taught that here question about the true place of worship is her attempt to dodge honest conversation with Jesus about her own life. But, in fact, she raises the central question that was of concern between her people the Samaritans, and Jesus' people, the Jews. It's a question that asks essentially, "Where can we find God? How can we know and experience God?" And unlike Nicodemus, she seems able to comprehend Jesus' answer that God's presence cannot be confined to one mountain or another, but is indeed everywhere, and is before her in a unique, potentially life-giving way in him.

Do you see how easy it is to make the wrong assumptions about other people? To judge people by what we see on the surface?

Finally, Jesus was showing everyone involved in this story something new about God. The paradigm of the Samaritans was not adequate. God was not just located on their mountain. God was not just located in the temple in Jerusalem. No, God was a spirit whose presence could be experienced everywhere—by everyone. God was not a petty judge who wanted to get even with people who'd sinned. No, God was a gracious God who wanted to lure sinners back to him so they could be forgiven and changed. God's presence was bigger than any place one group held to be sacred; God was bigger than any person's sin; God was gracious and loving, not vindictive and punitive.

Jesus came to show the world that God was much more like a loving Father than an angry judge. In this conversation, after telling the Samaritan woman all about herself, Jesus does nothing to shame her or judge her. Indeed, she seems to be liberated by the fact that this Jewish man told her the truth about himself, offered her living water that could satisfy her deepest longings. She was so excited that she left her water jar and ran into the village to tell others.

And notice what she says. She does not speak with some voice of absolute certainty, or out of a place of self-righteous dogmatic conviction. "Here's someone who told me everything about myself. Could he be the Messiah?"

She wasn't quite sure. So she asked others to come and see Jesus. She asked them to help her understand how God was at work in Jesus. And after Jesus had been with them a few days time, they were convinced that indeed God was present in him, that God had sent him to them. They decided this for themselves.

Isn't that an interesting way to think about evangelism? A person looked out as an outsider by the tradition out of which Jesus came, a person about whom people had perhaps made all kinds

of false assumptions, becomes a witness to Jesus, and her witness, at least in part is in the form of a question, an invitation. “What do you think? Could he be the messiah?”

When Jesus comes we see ourselves, and other people, and most importantly God in a whole new light. The gospel is such good news, it is worth sharing with others, because it the heart is an invitation for us to see ourselves and everyone else as God’s dearly loved children. It’s to realize that connecting with Jesus is what gives us living water—something that will finally and fully satisfy whatever emptiness, heal whatever brokenness, we have experienced. And Jesus comes to offer you and me that gift today. I invite you to open your heart and receive this wonderful gift of living water, gracious acceptance, and lasting joy.