

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GRACE THAT EXPOSES”

Scripture Lesson: John 4: 5-42

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 8, 2026 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

John 4: 5-42

5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9 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.) 10 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." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 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." 15 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."

16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 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." 26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

27 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?" 28 Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 29 "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" 30 They left the city and were on their way to him.

31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." 32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. 35 Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. 36 The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal

life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. 37 For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Grace that Exposes

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

So far during the season of Lent, we have considered how it is that grace sustains us and how it also sets us free to love, for example. This morning we consider how it is that grace exposes us. It exposes us to ourselves and to one another, but more importantly, it exposes us to God. Indeed, it is not accidental that throughout the forty days of Lent we slow down long enough for God to help us identify the things in our lives that need to change.

The season of Lent invites us to pray with greater honesty, to confess with greater specificity, and to listen with greater attention. As we pay attention, what we discover is that grace does not always begin by soothing us. Sometimes it begins by revealing us.

The woman from Samaria, the one who met Jesus at the well, as it turns out, there is a lot to know about her. To begin, because she was from Samaria, the Jews held her in very low esteem. In fact, Jews would usually have made a more circuitous route and avoided that well because it was in the territory of people who were widely considered religiously unclean.

That's how most Jews thought of that unnamed woman at the well, and she knew it. This is partly why she was so surprised when Jesus spoke to her.

Another aspect of this story that shouldn't be overlooked is that she came to the well at noon. That's important because most people came at dawn or in the cool of the evening. We don't need to overemphasize it, but more than just coming to the well alone, this woman may have known personally what it meant to be alone.

But a trip to the well was unavoidable because everyone needs water, and that's what she needed as well. Jesus, though, recognizes that she has deeper needs, needs that mere water cannot address.

Again, she was surprised that Jesus spoke to her: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus responded by saying, "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."

Notice how gentle Jesus was with that woman. He didn't scold her and didn't start by talking about her sins. He talked about her thirst.

She was finding out what those who had come to believe in Jesus already knew: that all the wells in the world, all the things for which we thirst in life, all the things in which we place our trust and our hope, and into which we lower the water buckets of our lives—when we pull them up from those wells, they come up empty.

Jesus puts it this way: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again.”

Not surprisingly, she liked the sound of that. Who wouldn’t? “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

I suspect we do the same thing. Jesus promises life, a well that doesn’t run dry, and we manage to translate that into immediate relief. We’re ready for it.

But are we really? Because grace, in this case, speaks to a deeper thirst, maybe a thirst we didn’t even know we had, a kind of internal hunger for meaning and purpose.

Jesus tells her, “Go, call your husband.” Those words seem out of sequence and almost intrusive, don’t they?

A request for water, a willingness to provide living water, a response that says, “I’d like some of that,” and then Jesus says, “Now go, get your husband.”

It feels uncomfortable to us because we know from the story that her life is about to be exposed.

“I have no husband.”

“You are right,” Jesus said. “You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.”

Talk about putting it out there. But Jesus’ motivation was not to blame her or to shame her. Rather, it was to reveal to her that grace has a way of exposing who we are and what about us needs to be healed. It names the wound that needs to be treated and the idol that needs to be destroyed.

Such is the nature of grace, and such is the season of Lent.

Psalm 139 says, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me.”

While that may be terrifying, it is also the best news in the world, because God knows exactly who He is dealing with.

God knows our complicated histories. God knows the conversations we replay in our minds at two in the morning. God knows our private compromises and our public masks. And despite all of that, God goes out of His way to provide us with living water.

In Reformed theology we have that unfortunate and yet very consistent doctrine known as Total Depravity. What that tells us is that we are all sinful and that, when given the opportunity, every single one of us will sin and fall short of the glory of God.

Sadly, that reality parches our spirits. More to the point, in a spiritual sense, we’re dying of thirst.

But the miracle is that God’s grace exposes our thirst. It helps us understand that the various earthly wells from which we drink will not satisfy our souls, and that only the living water that Jesus provides can do that.

The woman at the well did what many of us do when we feel uncomfortable or exposed. She changed the subject. She deflected the conversation and shifted the focus away from herself.

In this case, she turned attention toward Jesus: “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain...”

It’s easy to become abstract when things start to get personal.

For example, when we recognize impatience in ourselves, we might be prone to talk about the causes of impatience in general. When we sense our own intolerance, it is often easier to point out the intolerance of others.

To put it another way, it is far easier to talk about doctrine, or tradition, or someone else's shortcomings than it is to face our own.

Now Jesus, in a masterful way, works with this woman, deflections and all, and he says, "Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, but in spirit and truth."

In other words, the exact space doesn't matter to God. It could be Mount Sinai, Mount Zion, Mount Nebo, or it could be in a well over two-hundred-year-old sanctuary in Charleston, South Carolina.

What ultimately matters is not where worship happens, but that it happens in spirit and in truth.

And about that truth, you know that the Messiah for whom you are looking—"I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Imagine the woman in our story suddenly waking up to the possibilities. This Jesus, the one who came to the well, the one who crossed all kinds of societal boundaries and sought her out when no one else would, he is the answer to her prayers. He is the one she has been looking for her whole life.

If we were to look back to last week's lectionary reading from the New Testament, when we reflected on the three occasions in John's Gospel where Nicodemus shows up, we would notice something striking.

Jesus never gave Nicodemus, an insider, as clear a self-disclosure of who he was as he gave the woman in today's story.

The sequence of how he did it is also important. Before she would confess her sins or even confess that Jesus was Lord, before any of that, Jesus sought her out and said, "I am he."

Yes, God's grace exposed her sin. It revealed the path her life had taken. But in doing so, and by grace through faith, her life was saved. From that moment of exposure, an evangelist emerged.

John tells us that she left her water jar behind. That doesn't mean that earthly water was no longer needed, but it does show that this woman had discovered something even more satisfying.

Granted, this story doesn't give us all the details. We never hear her say, "I've cleaned up my life," or "I've finally figured everything out."

Instead, she runs back to the town and says, "He told me everything I had ever done." In that sense, her exposure became her testimony.

I wonder how this plays out in our own lives. In my earlier years of ministry, I thought it was most important, for myself and for the church, that we always have our act together. By that I mean that we always appear well-organized, polished, and compelling. On our best days, I trust we are.

But far more important than appearances is that we actually stay near the water, that we are honest about who we are and who we are not.

Our calling is not to hide our thirst, but to come again and again and again to the place where living water flows, trusting that God will continue to quench our thirst.

The church becomes a far truer witness to the kingdom of God when we show the world that we too know where to go when we get thirsty. After all, it is not only the world that sins and falls short of the glory of God. We do too.

In rural Australia, farmers often sink wells because livestock will never wander too far from a reliable water source. They may roam, but they always return to what gives life.

The church, in much the same way, exists to draw people to the well, and sometimes that means trusting that God's grace will expose us before it refreshes us.

If Lent feels serious, that's because it is. But it's not serious with the intent of bringing us down. It is serious so as to finally lift us up.

The same Jesus who says, "Go, call your husband," is the very Messiah for whom our hearts long. Jesus still says to all those whom God has called, and to all those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, "I am He."

To put it another way, the same Jesus who names our thirst and our sins is the same one who promises that whoever drinks of the water that he gives will never be thirsty again.

In this way, God's grace does not expose us so that we are humiliated. No. It's like a surgeon's light in an operating room, or any light that illuminates the darkness. It is light that reveals and exposes, and it does so for the sake of healing and wholeness.

Ours is a blessed fountain which, as our children's hymn declares, is "deep and wide."

When that Samaritan woman went and told her story, when she invited others to see what a difference Jesus made in her life, and when they came to that proverbial well and tasted and saw that the Lord was good, their lives would never be the same again.

Listen again to what they said to the woman: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Not just the Savior of those who have their lives figured out, or the Savior of the well-informed or the respectable. No. Jesus is the Savior of the world.

So perhaps a good question to ask ourselves today is this: Where might Jesus be exposing something in our lives? Not to shame us, but to free us. Or what water have we been drinking from that leaves us thirsty?

And are we willing to let Jesus name it?

To be sure, Jesus knows our shortcomings already. Nevertheless, by helping us know where we sin and fall short of the glory of God, and by helping us know those areas in our lives where we miss the mark, by giving us a grace that exposes us, God has given us a grace that saves us.

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