

19-Mar-2017 Sermon The Charisma of Jesus

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In her sermon two weeks ago, Carol said that “The invitation to a holy Lent is an invitation to move beyond the everyday into a deeper relationship with God.” So in this sermon, let’s explore how we can do that, as guided by one of the most surprising and rich stories in the New Testament.

Part one: “Looseness and Intimacy.”

Let’s set the scene geographically. If we put Jerusalem and Seattle on the same line, in terms of latitude, then the distance between Jerusalem and the top of Galilee, which is 90 miles, is the same as the distance between Seattle and Bellingham. And Anacortes is situated near the village of Cana in southwest Galilee, where Jesus turned water in wine. And Mount Gerazim, where our story takes place today, is 30 miles north from Jerusalem, or the same distance as Seattle to Everett.

As we’ll see, the Samaritan woman is a representative, a representative of us, of our neighbors across the street, of anyone interested in God. And America *is* interested in God. 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God. And yet only 51 percent attend church once a month or more often. So this Samaritan woman represents these 39 percent who believe in God but don’t have anything to do with “standard” religion. And, we’ll see, she’s a representative of *us* as well—in fact, she’s a spokesperson for all humanity.

Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink. On one hand, this is not all that unusual, as He has just walked 30 miles and the disciples, who usually take care of Him, are in the nearby city looking for a Carls Junior. On the other hand, Jews were not supposed to be friendly with Samaritans, and men were not supposed to be friendly with women that they did not know. Consequently, when Jesus talks to her, she questions why He’s speaking to her.

And that’s all the entry that Jesus needs. We read about it sometimes in the Gospels, but we really need to expand our understanding of just how *charismatic* and *magnetic* Jesus was. That’s how we move beyond the everyday to a deeper relationship with God: through Scripture, through prayer, through the Eucharist, and through all of it to the charisma and the magnetism of Jesus. At each sentence He gets closer, relationally, to this woman. We see the *looseness* and the *intimacy* of Jesus in His conversation.

First He tells her that if she knew who He was, she'd ask Him for living water. Now there's a twinkle in His eye when he says this, because He's making a joke, a joke that doesn't work in English. When He says "living water," He means water that will bring her life, but more elementary, He means that He will give her running water. That is, water that's moving. In English we say "running water," while in Greek, for example, they said "living water." It's a joke, of course, because they're at a well, where the water is not living or running or anything.

"Are you greater than Jacob?" she asks. And Jesus moves closer. Closer. More intimate. "The people who get this living water," He says, "never get thirsty again. In fact, they themselves become a well."

"I'd like that," she says. And now she's hooked. That's what He does; that's what He's always done—hook people with His intimacy and His looseness. Through Scripture, through prayer, through the Eucharist. We talk about Jesus the King and Jesus the Lord and Jesus the Demander, but let's never lose sight of the fact that in addition, He's Jesus the Smoothie.

"Go get your husband," Jesus tells her. That's when things get awkward—and sometimes things *do* get awkward with Jesus—but only for a second. When she replies that she has no husband, He tells her that she's had five husbands and her current man is not her husband.

Here's where people often make a mistake of interpretation. She changes the subject, and we assume that it's because He's turned up the heat on this husband deal. We assume it, because we think it's all about *morality* for Jesus, that what He likes to do best is to catch us in compromising situations. But I think she changes the subject because she's got to get something off her chest. She knows now that she's in the presence of an expert, and there's something that's been bothering her for about 700 years, because it's been bothering *all* the Samaritan people. "Why is it that the Jews say that the only place to worship is in Jerusalem? *Why are we outsiders?*"

See, there's something bothering our neighbors across the street. There's something bothering America—both the 39 percent who believe in God but never come to church or the 66 percent of Washingtonians who never come to church or even most of humanity. And what's bothering them, is *worship*. Namely, why the heck *should* they worship? If it's about God, then where *is* God in this worship that you keep promoting? *Is* God there? Because they want *God*, not *worship without* God. And it's the same with us. Not community without God. Not Scripture or prayer or the Eucharist or potlucks—we don't *any of it* if God's not present. Okay, maybe potlucks.

“HOLD ON,” says Jesus to the woman. Soon it will be clear that you *are* worshipping the Father. Soon you’ll know that you *are* worshipping in spirit and in truth. God is not only present, but He’s out *seeking* people. God is not only charismatic, not only magnetic, not only loose, not only intimate, but He’s out *looking for* people to *apply* His charisma and His magnetism on. *That’s* why 90 percent of Americans believe in God. That’s *His* doing.

Part two: Jesus slams the door.

And then it happens. Jesus does not demonstrate good religious tolerance. Jesus does not practice good listening skills and open-mindedness. Jesus does not use “I statements.” Jesus says “You Samaritans worship what you do not know; *we* worship what we know, for salvation is *from the Jews.*” He doesn’t exactly affirm her faith journey; He tells her that she and all the Samaritans are wrong. Salvation is from the Jews because God chose the Jews and because Jesus was a Jew.

Because intimacy and choosing belong together. To illustrate that, imagine I’m a woman, and I’ve been dating a fellow for a long time, and one evening he says, “Brianna, I’ve been thinking a lot about our future.” And I think, “Oh boy, what’s going on here?!” And he says, “I just love you so much and I enjoy your company and I can’t imagine what life would be like without you.” And I think, “Is what I think is happening happening?” And my heart is starting to take off like a big Saturn rocket. And he says, “So, Brianna, I want you to be my wife.” And my heart is circling the earth like the Apollo spacecraft and it’s the happiest day of my life and I can’t wait to say yes! And he says, “Yes, I want you to be my wife... and *join all my other wives.*”

“*Say what?* Just how many *other wives* do you have?” “Oh many. Many many. For how could I choose just *one* woman? All women are so beautiful and kind and gentle; it would be crime just to choose one....” And no longer is my heart circling the earth—it has now thudded back into earth, and not into the beautiful ocean either. It’s crash landed somewhere in north New Jersey. I don’t feel special anymore. I don’t want to see this creep any more. I just want to punch him in the nose.

Because choosing and intimacy go together. God chooses Abraham, not Abraham’s neighbor, Bob. God chooses Isaac, not Ishmael. God chooses Jacob, not Esau. God chooses Israel, not the Egyptians. And so on. When the woman tells Jesus that she feels like an outsider, Jesus replies, “Yes; that’s because you *are* an outsider.” You don’t get it. You worship *what you don’t know*. Salvation comes from the Jews.

But even this is not enough to push the woman away; in fact, it draws her even closer. Such is the

looseness and the intimacy of Jesus. Such is the magnetism of Jesus. He doesn't need to practice tolerance to hook her. "The messiah will explain it all, when He comes," she says, and He answers, "He's *here*. Right *here*." He's out looking for you. He's closer. And then: He's *here*.

With each exchange Jesus moves tighter to the Samaritan woman and she to Him. It's as if He says her name with each sentence: "Woman, I can give you living water. Woman, I know all about you. Woman, hold on to worship. Woman, I *am* the messiah."

Part three: two questions and one answer.

In a lot of ways, this passage is about identity. Questions about identity. Inside; outside. And things are no different today. We might say, "I feel like an outsider at my church but an insider at my garden club. I'm an insider in my family except for my daughter, because I feel like an outsider in her family. I'm part of a committee to help migrant workers in Skagit County and everyone else in the group is a woman so I feel like an outsider but we work hard on consensus so I feel like an insider but we're all white so we feel like outsiders but the Latino culture is very patriarchal so I feel like an insider, helping outsiders get to be insiders in America which is increasingly trying to get these Latino outsiders *even more* outside. It's no wonder I can't sleep at night."

Thanks for the laughter, but I want you to know that that work is important: the work of helping outsiders get to be insiders. It's about widening the understanding of mercy. And we see it at work in the New Testament: it isn't until the 8th chapter of Acts that Peter convinces the other Jewish Christians that it's okay for the Samaritans to be insiders, and it isn't until the 2nd chapter of Galatians that Paul convinces *Peter* that it's okay for the *Gentiles* to be insiders. It's a lot of work. Important work.

The passage contains two sets of questions about identity. The first set is from the woman to Jesus: who *are* you? Who are you, a man, to talk to a woman? Who are you, a Jew, to talk to me, a Samaritan? How do you know things about me that I've never told you? Are you a prophet and can you talk about where we should worship? *Are* you the messiah? Jesus, who *are* you?

And the second question comes when she looks up to heaven and hears a voice ask her, "And *who are you?*" And she answers "I'm a person with relational and marital issues. I'm unlucky in love. I'm an outsider because I'm a woman and I'm an outsider because I'm a Samaritan and I'm an outsider because—let's face it—I'm out here by myself to get water even though most women in my village go out together to get water, for safety reasons. Social reasons. Either they don't want me to join them or I don't want to join them. Who *am I?* That's who I am."

There are these two questions: who is Jesus? And who are we? But I think there's one answer to both.

And the answer is *not* about the work of identity. For centuries the Church would answer the question, who is the woman? By saying "Let us answer that for you! You get to be a *Christian*! Come to church and get your identity here. Come be an insider *with us*. You get to worship every Sunday morning! You get to come to Wednesday evening prayer service! You get to volunteer to keep the church a nice place, a sanctuary, for us insiders! And you get to give money!"

And, increasingly, the 31% who believe in God but never attend church started to say, "No thanks. Sounds like a lot of work for something I don't know if I even want—insider religious status. And increasingly the 59% who sometimes come to church will say the same things: thanks, but no thanks."

But more recently, the Church has started to say, "First, we'll help you in your *own* spiritual journey to find where you can be an insider. And second, come join us broaden the understanding of God's mercy by doing identity work with us." But, honestly, identity work is *hard* work and it doesn't appeal to many people. And I think the events of the last election indicated that America is tired of hard identity work. We're just *so tired*. And when we get tired, we get cranky. And when we get hungry, we get cranky.

What, then, is the one solution to the two questions of identity? How do we move beyond the everyday into a deeper relationship with God? How does our hunger get satisfied? I think the answer is to circle back to the looseness, the intimacy, the charisma and the magnetism of Jesus Christ. When the woman tells Him that she feels like an outsider, He answers, "Yes; it's because you *are* an outsider." That's the end of the identity work in *that* conversation. But instead, He offers her *Himself*; He moves closer to her with each sentence; He links together choosing and intimacy; He says that God is out *looking for her* so that she feels the intimacy and runs off to the city to say, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" She has *become* the spring of water that gushes up to eternal life. Her heart *is* in orbit like a Gemini space ship. And *that's* available to *us*, and to our neighbors and to all of the outsiders—which is *all* of us. Through prayer, through scripture—weird though it is—, through the sacraments—the looseness, the intimacy, the charisma and the magnetism of Jesus Christ. He's out looking for us. He's closer. And then: He's *here*.