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Lent 2 – John 4:5-26 – God’s People Worship in Spirit and Truth

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These guys hated each other. The feud between the Jews and the Samaritans went way back, and covered ground that put the Hatfields and McCoys to shame. Their contempt for each other was bitter and deep-seated, and with good reason. Over 500 years earlier, when the Jews were just returning to the Promised Land and picking up the pieces after their exile in Babylon, these Samaritans offered to help the Jews rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The problem was that the Jews looked at the Samaritans as impure half-breeds – people who had intermarried with the heathen nations around them and worshipped their gods right along with the God of Israel. So the Jews refused their help, which then caused the Samaritans to attempt to sabotage the construction, rather than assist. Understandably, that set off a firestorm that never quite died down.

After the Jews rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, the Samaritans built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim in their own territory near Jacob’s Well, and they proclaimed *that* the true place of God’s worship and the most holy and sacred site on earth. Well, the Jews didn’t take too kindly to that, so around the year 125 BC, the Jews destroyed the Samaritans’ temple. From then on there was no fixing that rift, to the point that Jews even avoided stepping foot on Samaritan territory if at all possible, and let’s just say the Samaritans didn’t want the Jews there any more than the Jews wanted to be there in the first place.

Nothing in this world could heal that kind of wound, except the one who came from heaven to bring peace and forgiveness. Nothing in this world could heal that wound, but Christ could, because the Gospel he brought goes even deeper than petty feuds and past offenses. Christ came to Samaria in our Gospel lesson for today to teach them and to teach us that salvation is about so much more than who you are, where you live, what you’ve done, and where you worship. It’s about our Savior-God and the gift of forgiveness and eternal life that he gives to all who believe. Christ came to Samaria that day to overcome any outward obstacles and to call us to a reality that’s so much more important and profound: that God’s people worship in spirit and in truth.

So Jesus sat down that day next to Jacob’s well, in the shadow of Mt. Gerizim. While he was resting, a woman came to the well to draw water, probably around noon and probably by herself. Not that Jesus needed the hint, but most Jews probably would have had some real alarms going off here

in their heads. Of course the biggest thing wrong with this situation was that Jews simply do not associate with Samaritans. They didn’t want anything to do with each other; they didn’t even want to be around each other. Then especially Jewish men thought speaking to Samaritan women was very taboo, almost like they were speaking to a prostitute. And actually, that’s not too far from the kind of life this particular woman had led. See, normally women went to draw water in groups in the mornings or evenings when it was a little cooler, but the fact that this woman came to draw water at noon alone tells you that she was probably a social outcast. Turns out even those lowly Samaritans didn’t appreciate people treating their spouses like cars to buy and trade in every so often when you’re ready for someone new.

A Samaritan, a Samaritan woman, and an adulterer to boot. Three strikes and you’re out, most Jews thought. Most people probably looked at her like she was beyond help, not a church-going kind of person. But not Jesus. He came to reach the lost, he came to heal the sick, he came to bring food to the hungry and water to the thirsty, and so he came to that woman that day with all his grace and truth. He asked her for a drink and when she hesitated, he said, *“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

Well, she didn’t quite get what Jesus was trying to say. Here sat Jesus, no canteen, no bucket, no way to draw water from the bottom of the well. When she heard “living water,” that meant to her flowing water that was clean and refreshing from a spring or a stream, rather than water that sat still and stagnant collecting bacteria, like in a pond or cistern or jug. So where was Jesus supposed to get this water, she wondered. Was he just pulling her leg? Was he a trickster? Or was he a miracle-worker, even greater than the great Patriarch Jacob?

Well little did she know, she *was* speaking with someone greater. *“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* That water she got from the well Jacob dug – it sustained physical life for maybe a few days. But this water that Jesus offered would sustain her spiritual life for eternity. It would quench her thirst for real meaning and purpose and hope in her life; it would wash away all the wrong she had done, and it would purify her for everlasting life in heaven. Yes, this gift of God that Jesus offered really was living water – not just water that flowed, but water that gave life, real life, life to the full, as God always wanted his people to have.

Jesus could offer that gift of God because that's exactly who he was. Jesus came from heaven to be one of us so that he could redeem us and save us. Even though our sins separated us from him and should rightly have cast us out of his presence, he also offers us that water of life in his Word and in his baptism. It doesn't matter who you are, what you look like, or where you come from. Every soul is precious in God's sight, and Jesus freely offers that living water even to you. It doesn't matter what you've done in your past, that living water washes you clean and forever quenches your thirst for forgiveness and salvation. Just as he did for that Samaritan woman with all her imperfections, so also Jesus still reaches out to you with that gracious water of life that grants you new and vibrant life here in this world and most especially grants you eternal life in heaven with him forever.

So maybe you're wondering the same thing she was: how exactly do I get this living water? What exactly does that mean? If it comes from God, then I must have to go to God to get it, she thought. So then she asked Jesus the age-old question between Jews and Samaritans: where's the right place to worship God? Where do I have to be, what do I have to do so God will accept me and give me that living water?

Well, the way she was looking at that question was all wrong, even if it is the way the Samaritans and Jews and a lot of people even still now look at it. What God really cares about aren't the things we do so he'll accept us and what really matters to him isn't *where* we worship. It's *how* we worship. Jesus said to the woman, "*Believe me... a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.*"

God told his Old Testament people that the only proper place of worship was at the temple in Jerusalem, but even so, that was really just to teach God's people about his presence with them here, about their relationship with him, and about the blessings of gathering together for public worship. All along what's really been important to God wasn't the bricks and mortar. God is spirit, he doesn't live in temples built by human hands; he's not restricted to one place like we are. He's so much greater than that, and so what he wants from us is so much greater than just our physical, outward acts of worship. Since God is spirit, what he really cares about is our spirits, our souls, our hearts. He doesn't care about the things we do, in and of themselves. He cares about our motivation for doing them; he cares about the genuine, sincere faith from which your worship flows.

And since that's what God really wants from us, that teaches us first of all that going through the motions isn't good enough for him. He wants our hearts to be full of thanks and love for everything he's done for us and for our salvation. That's what really pleases God. And so that means that we can worship God anywhere, not just in a church building, and that everything we do to honor and glorify and serve our God in our lives really is worshipping him in God's sight.

So in everything we do, God's people worship him in spirit, but we also worship him in truth. That was where that Samaritan woman went wrong, because she didn't pay attention to God's Word. God told us how he wants us to worship him in the Scriptures, so there's nothing more important for people worshipping God than to be regularly connected to his Word. That's why even though God's people can worship him outside of a church building, God still wants us to be here regularly, because this is where we gather around the Word and sacraments with our fellow believers, and this is where we're strengthened in our faith and we can encourage and build each other up on our road to heaven. God teaches us how to worship him truly in Scripture – not just in our words of praise, not just in our church attendance, but in everything we do that reflects our Savior's love and care in this world. From even something as simple as offering a cup of cold water to the physically thirsty, all the way up to taking the Good News of Jesus to the spiritually thirsty, everything we do that flows from our living faith in Christ and that follows the truth of God's Word is exactly the kind of worship that our heavenly Father seeks and that our heavenly Father loves.

That was a big feud that Jesus healed, wasn't it? It went back a long way and got pretty ugly sometimes. But it wasn't so deep and ingrained that the power of Jesus' love couldn't overcome it and the flood of his living water couldn't wash it away. And actually, that's not just the feud between Jews and Samaritans. Really, that's the feud, if you will, between a holy God and sinners like us. By our sinfulness, we were God's enemies, people who hated him and deserved only to be punished by him. But instead of reaching out to destroy us, our God reached out to forgive us and save us. He reached out to wipe away everything that was wrong with us, to fix what was broken between us, and to promise us a place in heaven with him someday. He gave us the gift of saving faith in our hearts and he blessed us with the special dignity of worshipping him in spirit and in truth, and so we know that that gracious living water our Savior planted in us will one day spring up and overflow into everlasting life. God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.