

John 4:5-42
Sunday, March 15, 2020
Pastor Karen Boda, Assistant to the Bishop

Please pray with me. May to the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I'm Pastor Karen Boda, Assistant to the Bishop for Congregational Life, and I bring you greetings from Bishop Kevin Strickland and the entire staff of the Southeastern Synod.

These past two weeks have been particularly trying for the people in the Southeastern Synod. We've watched the communities in middle Tennessee, and especially the congregation of St. John's in Nashville, struggle with the loss of lives and the devastation following a tornado. We are now in a situation where due to the rapidly spreading coronavirus, communities across the United States are shutting down. Schools are closing. Grocery stores are emptied. Businesses are struggling. Paychecks are slashed. Children are hungry. Jobs are in limbo. Those we know and love are being struck with the virus or isolating to avoid the virus.

A facebook post this morning reminded me that in times like these when it feels like everything we know and love is being canceled or taken away from us, we are called to remember that

Conversations will not be canceled.
Relationships will not be canceled.
Songs, reading, self-care will not be canceled.
Love and hope will not be canceled.

May we lean into the good stuff that remains.
May we lean now into God.

Today's gospel reading from the book of John chapter 4, verses 4-42 is likely familiar. It's the story of the Samaritan woman. She's a woman who goes to the well at noon, which is the wrong time to be at the well. One doesn't go to the well in the heat of the day, yet she's there. In a phrase that only became popular in the last week, she has been forced to "social distance" herself. She has been isolated.

She's doing it not because she has the coronavirus, or because she's trying not to get it. She has been isolated because she's a Samaritan, and Jews aren't supposed to speak to *them*. She doesn't have a name, and she's socially disgraced because she's had more than one husband. Five to be exact, and we don't know why. It doesn't matter why, actually, other than the fact that at that time in history, a woman had to be married to survive. Not to *thrive*, but to *survive*.

She's an interesting woman, to say the least. One of the most interesting things about her is that she asks questions of Jesus. Not just one. But several. Given her status in life, and her being at the well at high noon, most anyone would have advised her that when she came upon Jesus, she should just keep her mouth shut and slip right on into the background.

Instead, this woman asks questions. Of Jesus. Even as she begins to realize who Jesus is, first a prophet, and then the Messiah, she keeps asking questions. She asks why Jesus, a Jew, is asking her, a Samaritan, for a drink of water. When Jesus tells her she should be asking him instead for living water, she doesn't understand, she then asks: "Sir, you don't even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. How are you going to get this 'living water' for me?" Finally, she asks Jesus whether he is a better man than their ancestor Jacob, who dug this well then passed it down to us.

These are rather bold questions for a Samaritan woman to ask a Jewish man. What would we do in that situation? Would we ask Jesus questions? Perhaps we are one of the people who have a list of questions to ask Jesus when we enter into those pearly gates. We might not ask now, but we're going to ask then! Even more fundamentally, though, do we ask questions about our faith? Today? In the safety and security of our own Bible studies, worship services, even families? Or do we do as I was taught growing up? Somehow, and I don't even know how it happened, I was taught not to question God.

There's a tiny little book my sister gave me when my first child was born. It's called *Children's Questions to God*.¹ In that book, little Norma asks God: Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that or was it an accident? Charlene asks: How did you know you were God? Finally, Jane asks: Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you've got now?

Children are encouraged to ask questions. The kids are cute and honest. Pretty smart too. Haven't we wondered some of those same questions?

Dr. Isadore Rabi, winner of a Nobel Prize in physics, was once asked *why* he became a scientist. He replied, "My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come home from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to ask: 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?'"²

We encourage our kids to ask questions. There is no such thing as a stupid question, we say. But do we ask questions?

Unlike Nicodemus last week, this woman, a Samaritan, is not an educated individual. She doesn't know anything about Jesus yet she asks him questions. Does Jesus, too, leave her in social isolation? Ignore her? Or does Jesus chastise her for the questions? No.

In fact, we see the tender side of Jesus. He doesn't get frustrated with her for being so literal. He explains the metaphors and the ironies which we also stumble over in the gospel of John. Then through their conversation, through the slow unraveling of the questions and answers, she begins to recognize just who he is. It is then she is transformed from someone with no knowledge of

¹ Edited by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshal, *Children's Letters to God* (Workman Publishing Company, NY: 1991)

² https://www.ou.org/torah/parsha/rabbi-sacks-on-parsha/the_necessity_of_asking_questions/; <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/19/opinion/l-izzy-did-you-ask-a-good-question-today-712388.html>

Jesus to a witness. She leaves her water jug and heads back into the city to tell everyone what Jesus had done and said. She tells the people – come and see.

I don't need to remind you that a woman in Jesus' time was to be primarily seen and not heard – especially *this* woman who had been socially distanced from the community. But she opened her heart to hear Jesus, and his love transformed her so that she is able to do a radical thing – tell everyone who Jesus is.

This woman demonstrates for us today what can happen when we let the Spirit draw us out of isolation and pull us into the warmth of God's embrace. When we ask the questions that have lain on our hearts for decades even. When we then *open* our hearts to hear Jesus in our lives and *leave* our hearts open for Jesus to transform us.

Because if we think we have all the answers about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, creation, the resurrection, ascension, why the beavers didn't eat Noah's ark – side note: I was actually asked that question last week...

If we think we know why bad things happen to good people, why our loved ones die of cancer, why the tornado destroyed St. John's Lutheran church and the coronavirus has now changed the world as we know it...

If we think we know all of that and have no need for questions, then we are closing the door for God to show us new things and new ways. If we open ourselves to question, we are opening the doors to transformation, for our hearts to be changed permanently and forever, and for a relationship with Jesus.

In the gospel of John, faith isn't a noun. It's not something that can be achieved. Instead, faith is a verb – always active, always growing, always changing. When we allow ourselves to question, and then really listen like the woman at the well, we open ourselves up to being in a relationship with Jesus.

Our questions might not be answered with a yes or no, or even in a way that we can understand now. Instead, the answer will come back as a relationship. As a closeness to Jesus that we never before experienced. In our lives being changed.

Amen.