

7/24 Sermon: Jesus and the Woman at the Well: The Brokenness of Relationships

Scripture: John 4:7-29, 39-42

In his book, “Outliers,” author Malcolm Gladwell wrote about a small town called **Roseto**, located about 30 miles north of Allentown, in the foothills of Eastern Pennsylvania. For years, Roseto (translated to Rose Garden) primarily comprised of Italian immigrants who lived in multigenerational homes. As Gladwell wrote, the town made national news in the 1950s for its unprecedentedly low rates of heart disease relative to those of neighboring towns with more American traditions. Social scientists were puzzled. The people of Roseto didn’t eat particularly healthily, often cooking with lard instead of olive oil. Meals typically consisted of cheese and fried meatballs, foods known to raise cholesterol levels. Many townspeople smoked cigars, worked in foundries and struggled with obesity. But their emotional health flourished. As a close-knit group, the Rosetans seldom felt socially isolated. For years, the town was defined by friendships, social activity and support for one another. When someone was down, a loved one or neighbor was there to pick them up. In other words: The Rosetans were rarely lonely. “You had to appreciate the idea that community — the values of the world we inhabit and the people we surround ourselves with — has a profound effect on who we are,” wrote Gladwell (p.11).

Some of you may have grown up in a community like that. I hear stories that Hershey was like that. However today, a sense of community is lacking for many Americans. In 2018 the United States surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, said the country was experiencing an “epidemic of loneliness” driven by the accelerated pace of life and the spread of technology into all of our social interactions. With this acceleration, he said, efficiency and convenience have “edged out” the time-consuming messiness of real relationships. The result is a public health crisis on the scale of the opioid epidemic or obesity, Dr. Murthy said. This of course continued through the pandemic, and recent studies say that in 2022, post pandemic, more than half of U.S. adults (58%) are considered lonely.¹ Loneliness, as defined by mental health professionals, is a gap between the level of connectedness that you want and what you have. It is not the same as social isolation. People can have a lot of contact and still be lonely.² However when asked if you had one person you could call on for an emergency, outside of your family, these Americans claim they have no one.

In our lesson today, Jesus reaches out to a lonely woman whose broken relationships are not helping her, but hindering her. And as he does he helps us see the beauty of faith in God, faith in one’s self, faith in one’s community, as we continue this sermon series based on our sanctuary windows.

Here’s the background. To begin with, tradition was, women were the ones who gathered water daily at the local well, and that chore was usually done early in the morning before the heat of the day or they would wait until after the sunset to draw water. But if we start with the beginning of chapter 4, we would read these words: **4 Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. ³ So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. ⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.**

Shortly after that, the woman arrives. So the first clue that something was wrong in this woman’s life is when John notes that she came to the well at the hottest time of the day, at noon, a time when she was sure no one else was around.

But Jesus was there and if she was surprised to see him, she must have really been shocked when he spoke to her, saying, **"Give me a drink."** Now it was common knowledge that Jews did not share cups or bowls with

¹ <https://newsroom.cigna.com/loneliness-epidemic-persists-post-pandemic-look>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/20/nyregion/loneliness-epidemic.html#:~:text=Biology%20of%20an%20Epidemic&text=Loneliness%2C%20as%20defined%20by%20mental,measure%20of%20a%20person's%20contacts>.

Samaritans, due to their religious differences. So the unnamed woman questions Jesus, **“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”** Jesus replies, **“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.”** As is often the case in John’s gospel there is some level of misunderstanding in their conversation. Jesus is talking about new life, eternal life, and the woman thinks in practical terms, at the mention of “living water” she perks up because there was a legend about Jacob, aka Israel, drawing water from the well and the water bubbled up, hence living water. So she replies to Jesus, **“Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?”** She continues, **“Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank it?”** In his answer, we are given a clue to Jesus’ identity here, that yes, he is greater than Jacob because he says **“those who drink of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty.”** Naturally the Samaritan woman asks Jesus for some “living water,” so that, in her own words, **“I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”**

At this point, Jesus confronts her problems head on, he tells her, **“Go, call your husband, and come back.”** And that was the problem, she had no husband. In fact she had 5 ex-husbands and was currently living with another man. Now some may think that Jesus is being cynical, almost cruel to have called her on this. But why Jesus confronts her is because he feels her pain and he wants to help her, help herself and the only way to do so is to deal with one’s problems. In her case it was her low self worth.

You see in this time and age, divorce was strictly a man’s prerogative. A man could divorce his wife simply by saying “I divorce you” three times and walking out. So part of the tragedy of this woman’s life is the fact that *she had had five men all walk out on her, they all discarded her.* And now her present partner did not even think enough of her to make a permanent arrangement with her. That type of rejection not only marked her relationship with him, but with others as well. If she is not worthy to be a wife, she was hardly worthy of anything else. As you can imagine such social judgments can wear a person down, emotionally and spiritually. She was alone.

However, just like anyone with any personal problem, the woman did not want to talk about her past and present, nor the issues she knew she had to face, so she changed the subject. She began talking about religious differences. **“Tell me, Preacher, which Church is the right one in which to worship: the Presbyterian or the Methodist?”** Well, that’s not what she said, just making sure you were paying attention. The text reads, **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.”** The Jews insisted that the right place to worship God was Jerusalem, where the Temple was; the Samaritans, who were not allowed to share in the rebuilding of the Temple, had decided that Mt. Gerizim was the right place, claiming it to be the oldest the mountain as it was the land that Noah embarked on after the flood. It was also where Abraham was going to sacrifice Isaac, but God provided the ram. But Jesus would not be put off by her divergence, in fact he took her variance and molded it into the course of action he needed to help her. He said that there would come a time when people would look to neither mountain as the sacred place of God’s residence or the temple, rather we will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

And that is the key point to this passage, and to the help for this woman. You see, with the statement of v 23 **“the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth”**, according to Jesus, no one place is sacred enough to worship God: only persons, and all persons at that. This woman’s problem in life was not that she had mistook the proper Temple in which to worship, but that she had undervalued her own self as the Temple of the living God. The dwelling place of God, is not centered on one building, it’s not the synagogue, mosque, cathedral, or church. Nor is it a particular group of people or race. The temple of God is you and I, our bodies. That is where God is, in the spirit and truth in us.

When God was delivering the Israelites, he told them in **Leviticus 26:11ff**, **“ I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my**

people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high” We are the temple of God; therefore our heads need to be held high as we center our lives on the God that is within us.

And the presence of Jesus, who gives us living water, initiates this transformation of worship, as he transforms our own self worth regarding God. Because if God is dwelling in and through us, we must come to recognize our worth and value.

Going back to the loneliness epidemic, according to Dr. Cacioppo, an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral neuroscience at the University of Chicago, there are interventions that can help. “For years people thought the best thing you could do for a lonely person is to give them support,” she said. “Actually, we found that it’s about receiving and also giving back. So the best thing you can do for someone who is lonely is not to give them help but ask them for help. So you give them a sense of worth and a chance to be altruistic. Even if we’re getting the best care, we still feel lonely if we can’t give something back.”³

For the woman at the well, she went forth and did exactly that, she shared all that Jesus said and taught. She shared because even though she was on the receiving end of most of that community’s judgment and unhappiness, she knew there were many others suffering as well. Others who needed mending. And so the text ends with, **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.** The broken relationships in that community were mended and healed, to form a beautiful community of faith.

Friends, today, we see our communities suffering too because loneliness is real, and broken relationships are harmful, the results are violence, addictions, prejudices. Yet the gospel and that window remind us that no one needs to be lonely when the living water of Jesus is poured into their lives. Because it will fill you and encourage you to reach out to others, confident of God’s presence in your life, confident in God’s love that heals our broken relationships, confident that no one needs to be lonely when we live out the word, the truth, and the way of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Lord, as a people of your Church, your family, we thank you for the hope you lay in our hearts. As we embrace your life flowing through ours, help us to offer the same to others, that they may live and breathe in your presence, recognizing their worth. Establishing relationships that provide value and confidence in the life you call each of us to. I ask this in the name of the living water, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Sidenote: We at Hershey First strive to offer various groups to gather and get connected. We have our children’s ministry, youth and young adult ministry, music ministry, there is the Circle of Hope, focused on sharing faith with the community, and Circle of Faith, a group that gathers to work on prayer shawls and quilts to give to shut ins and those in need, and various Bible studies. If you are feeling lonely, please let us know, and we will get you connected with the living water of Christ running through this church.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/20/nyregion/loneliness-epidemic.html#:~:text=Biology%20of%20an%20Epidemic&text=Loneliness%2C%20as%20defined%20by%20mental,measure%20of%20a%20person's%20contacts>.