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## From the Pulpit: March 12, 2023

Third Sunday in Lent—Day Light Saving Begins

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

John 4:4–42

We are in the midst of a sermon series about the many characters in the Bible who are important to the story but never get a name in scripture. The Samaritan Woman at the Well is one of the anonymous, **but** the name tradition gives her is well known to anyone who has been watching *The Chosen*. Long before the TV series, the Eastern Orthodox Church Named her St. Photeine (Photini), from the Greek root *phos* meaning “light.” She is known as the “enlightened one,” and the “illuminator.” By the radiance of her witness, we are able to see that Christ’s salvific gift of abundant life, that which is life in the presence of God now and forever from now, is available to all.

Because today’s scripture is a long and wonderful dialogue, I will intersperse commentary into the text as we go. If you wish to follow along in your Bible, we are in John 4:5–42.

Having upset the religious leaders in Judea, Jesus decides to take the short route back to Galilee. There’s just one problem, he’s going through Samaria. Tensions between Samaritans and Jews date back centuries. They share scripture, but they worship at different holy sites.<sup>1</sup> To make matters worse, the Judeans destroyed the Samaritan’s holy shrine just 150 years before Jesus arrived in town unexpectedly to talk to one of the local women.

Nevertheless Jesus and his disciples take off on their road trip through Samaria. At noon they stop for lunch. The disciples go looking for some first century fast food while Jesus sits down to rest. He chooses the most popular proposal spot in the Hebrew Scriptures: Jacob’s well.<sup>2</sup> It’s the Buckingham fountain of engagement sites.

Along comes a local woman to fetch some water. We

*The Unnamed, IX: The Quintuple Divorcée*

aren’t told why she’s there in the middle of the day, though people like to assume it’s because she’s shunned. Maybe she simply needs more water. In any case, she’s probably hot, tired, and not in the mood to talk to a peasant passing through town whose best opening line is, “Give me a drink.”

She snaps back, “*How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?...*” Jesus answers, “*If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is talking, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.*”

The woman is no fool. She knows her scriptures and she certainly is smart enough to know when you come to a well you bring your own Hydro flask, so she says, “*Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well..?*”

Jesus continues with his metaphorical proposal, “*Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink my water will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*” Amused, she decides to see what will happen if she accepts: “*Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.*”

Then Jesus shifts the conversation... “*Go, call your husband,*” he says. She answers, “*I have no husband.*” But Jesus already knew this. He’s never met her face to face but he knows her innermost thoughts like only the divine can. He tells her, “*You have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband.*”

Notice Jesus says this matter-of-factly, without condemnation. The text doesn’t tell us whether it was death, divorce, or some other act of fate that leaves her in this predicament. But the setting gives us important clues about his intentions. Jesus is offering not only a

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<sup>1</sup>Gayle O’Day and Susan Hulen. *John*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006, 51.

<sup>2</sup>Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Women’s Bible Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012.

different kind of water, but a different kind of relationship than what she knows.

All right she thinks, he must be a prophet. So she gives him a theological test. Pointing south toward the rubble of her people's holy shrine, she says:

*Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ...the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,...*”

Again, she responds with what she knows from scripture:

*“I know that the Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ).*

And, for the first time in John's gospel, Jesus identifies himself directly, beginning with the same words God spoke to Moses at the burning bush: I AM.

*“I am he, the one who is speaking to you”*

Just then his disciples come back and the woman abandons her water jar to go to the city saying, *“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! She tempts the villages with a question, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ...*

*Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, ... They came to stay with Jesus and later They said to the woman, “we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”*

There are at least three strikes against Photini: she's a Samaritan, she's a woman, and she's “a quintuple divorcée,” which is one of the more polite ways her moral character has been described through the centuries. Other, sympathetic commentators cast her as a victim, a powerless woman in an entrenched patriarchy.

I believe there is another way to interpret this text, one which recognizes the role she plays in illuminating the full arc of the gospel, where Jesus reaches across the vast chasm of unbelief separating humans from God. Jesus doesn't offer Photini abundant life **in spite** of who she is or what she's done. He offers it to her **because of who she is...** A Samaritan. A woman. Ordinary. Imperfect. Human.

By my count there are more important things about the Samaritan woman than the number of husbands she's had. In fact she's a record holder in John's Gospel:

1. She has one of the longest theological discussions with Jesus.<sup>3</sup>
2. She is the first person to whom Jesus directly identifies himself.
3. She's the first to go to tell others who Jesus is and what he does.

This is why Byzantine chants sing of “Photini: Equal to the Apostles”<sup>4</sup>

Other characters in this gospel, even those from Jesus' own religious tradition, are too dimwitted to understand his complex metaphors. In the glare of the noonday sun, Photini sees that Jesus offers something more essential than water in the desert: an everlasting relationship with God that brings joy, purpose, and meaning to an ordinary life.

Don't we all muddle our way through the mundane? We put dinner on the table and laundry in the washer. We make the coffee so we can make the commute. We wait in the carpool lane and wait for the grade to post. We call the plumber and our mothers, sometimes even in the correct order. We log into zoom, *again*. ...It's fine, we say. Everything is fine. But deep down, the well of joy is dry. “Is this all that life has to offer?”

The lucky among us know a beloved, a BFF or a brother in whose presence our hearts overflow. With them even washing the dishes can be fun. Even a road trip across the nothingness of Nebraska is a joy. With them we dare to hope as poet Mary Oliver hopes, “to be a bride married to amazement. To be a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. To never wonder if I have made my life something particular and real.”<sup>5</sup>

Three years ago the world shut down. I made a habit of walking the familiar trail from my house, through Middlefork Savanna. Like everyone I was worried about what would happen. What did it mean to stay away from...everyone? Where was God in the fear and uncertainty? And then I got to the bridge, and I saw the tiny flowing stream, the Middlefork that eventually joins two others to become the Chicago river.

<sup>3</sup>Woman's Bible Commentary, 522.

<sup>4</sup>Coloe, Mary. *Wisdom Commentary: John 1–10*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2021, 121.

<sup>5</sup>Mary Oliver, “When Death Comes”

“an everlasting relationship with God that brings joy, purpose, and meaning to an ordinary life.”

In the early days of the pandemic I saw this living water in a new way. Even when I am forced to stand still, separated from people, and places I love, God's grace is always moving toward us, through the Savannah and through Samaria.

In Protestant tradition she is known by the gender and ethnic identity of her "quasi-title,"<sup>6</sup> "the Samaritan woman." And it is her namelessness that reminds us that she could be you or me. She could be our best friend. She could absolutely be our worst enemy. Living water is for all.

The Samaritan Woman in John is a theologian, versed in scripture, able to hold her own with Jesus himself. This is a great text for the Sunday after International Women's Day. Let me tell you about another woman theologian, the first woman to teach theology at a U.S. seminary, Georgia Harkness. She taught just down the road at one of my alma maters, Garrett Evangelical, from 1939–1950.

She was an "advocate for women's ordination," who once held her own against one of the greatest thinkers in Christian history, Karl Barth.<sup>7</sup> At the World Council of Churches gathering in 1948, the same gathering commemorated in our stained glass windows, Barth and a couple men wandered into a session on the Life and Work of Women in the Churches. The chairman called on Harkness to defend women's ordination. Knowing her Bible, and maybe thinking of the Samaritan Woman, she said, that "in the New Testament Jesus assumed always that men and women were equal before God." Barth argued that this was completely wrong; and cited scripture to defend his position. According to Harkness, "the room buzzed. Barth convinced nobody, and if "it was a joke, "it backfired." A year later when asked if he recalled meeting Harkness, he replied, "Remember me not of that woman."<sup>8</sup>

Today Garrett grads wear red shoes to graduation and ordination in her honor.<sup>9</sup> If you want to know why, come find me at coffee hour.

As someone who was ordained in red shoes, standing in this

<sup>6</sup>Coloe, 128–129

<sup>7</sup><https://barth.ptsem.edu/biography/>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.bu.edu/sth-history/prophets/georgia-harkness/>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.resourceumc.org/en/partners/gcsr/home/content/georgia-harkness/>

pulpit today, it's easy to think that the question of women's ordination has been settled, but just a few weeks ago the Southern Baptist Convention ousted Saddleback Church because they ordained several women who had served on the staff for decades. The same Saddleback founded by Rick Warren who wrote the bestselling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. The same Saddleback where 20,000 people worship weekly.<sup>10</sup>

Religious division is not new. In today's text we note the animosity between Samaritans and Judeans. Decades later, when the Gospel according to John was written people were being kicked out of the synagogues. The Eastern Orthodox Church, who celebrates the Feast Day of St. Photini this time of year, was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church in the "Great Schism of 1054" over the wording of the Nicene Creed and whether or not unleavened bread could be used for communion.<sup>11</sup>

This Samaritan Woman story is a particularly appropriate text for Kenilworth Union. In the first church constitution the founders wrote: "*Recognizing*

*the minor differences which exist among believers... we have united as a church of Jesus Christ upon the great essentials of the Christian faith.*"<sup>12</sup>

For all of our 130-year history, unity across our differences has been a guiding principle. At the same time Protestant Christianity in the United States was breaking into what historian David Hollinger calls two broad groups: the ecumenical and the evangelical.<sup>13</sup> If you wonder how churches like this one exist in a rapidly fracturing religious landscape, you will find Hollinger's book a provocative read.

Kenilworth Union remains fiercely independent, but Hollinger would label us more ecumenical than evangelical for three reasons: our participation in the movement of the World Council of Churches, the way we read and interpret

<sup>10</sup><https://religionnews.com/2023/02/24/how-did-saddleback-get-kicked-out-of-the-sbc-its-complicated/>

<sup>11</sup><https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/great-schism/>

<sup>12</sup>Campbell, Sallie. *Kenilworth Union Church History: I Thank God Upon Every Remembrance of You*, Kenilworth: Kenilworth Union Church, 1992, 3–4

<sup>13</sup>Hollinger, David. *America's Christian Fate*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.

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## —Prayers of the People— The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

the Bible seriously but not literally, and the fact that senior ministers come from mainline Protestant traditions. And yes, women preach and pastor here.

I've been working on a paper for my doctoral program in which I claim that unity is as close to doctrine as exists here. This founding principle is threaded throughout our worship and ministry. Deep in the archives I was delighted to find a document called, *The Inclusive Jesus*, which credits Dr. Bowen and Susie Kiphardt with articulating how to use this theology with children. Listen to their wisdom for a divided world:

*God wants us to live in community and our community has become worldwide. If we want a peaceful world, we cannot afford to negatively judge other cultures and faiths just because they are different. We cannot afford to proclaim that some will go to heaven and some will not. This is God's domain. We want to teach our children about the **inclusive Jesus** so they can offer love and forgiveness to our world and find joy in doing so.* Susie Kiphardt<sup>14</sup>

Kenilworth Union's two guiding scriptures are carved in stone. But, if we were ever to consider a third, I would nominate today's text about the Samaritan woman, the quintuple divorcee whose story shows us that Jesus will never be hemmed in by human borders, boundaries, prejudices, or stereotypes.

Friends, people are weary of wandering around the deserts of division. All long to be invited out of our mundane existence into God's presence where we are seen clearly and known deeply. We yearn to "come and see" Jesus' never-ending stream of love and welcome.

Jesus is the living water in the driest places and the relationship that lasts. Hearing this good news, may we be like Photini: so changed by Christ's inclusive, divine grace that we shine with joy as bright as the noon day sun.

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<sup>14</sup>Susie Kiphardt, "Teaching Children About the Inclusive Jesus: Sunday School Curriculum" Kenilworth Union Church handout, 2009.

*This is a prayer of St. Patrick, the fifth-century English cleric who brought the Gospel to Ireland, and whose feast day is this coming Friday.*

### **Creator God,**

at the beginning of time, you created all things and called them good:  
the virtues of the star-lit heaven,  
the glorious sun's life-giving ray,  
the whiteness of the moon at even,  
the flashing of the lightning free,  
the whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,  
the stable earth, the deep salt sea  
around the old eternal rocks.

### **Redeemer God,**

when the time was right you granted us  
Christ's incarnation;  
his baptism in the Jordan river;  
his death on the cross for our salvation.  
His bursting from the spiced tomb;  
his riding up the heavenly way;  
his coming at the day of doom.

### **Sustainer God, come as Holy Spirit today,**

your power to hold and lead,  
your eye to watch, your might to stay,  
your ear to hearken to our need,  
your ancient wisdom to teach,  
your hand to guide, your shield to ward,  
the true and timeless word to give us speech,  
your heavenly host to be our guard.

Christ be with us, Christ within us,  
Christ behind us, Christ before us,  
Christ beside us, Christ to win us,  
Christ to comfort and restore us,  
Christ beneath us, Christ above us,  
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,  
Christ in hearts of all that love us,  
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.  
We pray this prayer in the strong name of the Trinity,  
the Three in One, the One in Three,  
of whom all nature hath creation,  
eternal Father, Spirit, Word.  
Praise to the Lord of our salvation,  
salvation is of Christ the Lord. **Amen.**

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