

Just A Simple Conversation

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John 4:7-30

Evangelism Sunday

FPC Uvalde
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According to a Presbyterian News Service article dated June 22 of this year, the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) has announced in its annual statistical report that membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) fell by 69,381 in 2008, continuing a trend that began in the mid-1960s.

Total membership of the denomination is now 2,140,165.

According to the Research Services office of the General Assembly Council (GAC), the 2008 decline was the PC (USA)'s largest numerical and percentage net membership loss since Presbyterian reunion in 1983.

Almost 104,000 people joined the PC (USA) last year, but that good news was more than offset by the 34,101 Presbyterians who died, the 34,340 who were members of the 25 congregations that left the PC (USA) for other denominations, and the staggering 104,428 who were removed from the rolls by their sessions without apparently joining any other church.

The Rev. Eric Hoey, the PCUSA's director of evangelism and church growth said, "The answer to turning the tide lies in simply sharing the Good News." Sounds just too simple, doesn't it?

Some of you know that I served as Associate Pastor at a small Presbyterian Church in El Paso. Part of my call was to measure the feasibility of beginning a Hispanic congregation at the church where I had been called. A big part of the work I did during my first year was reaching out to the neighborhoods around our church. Oh we tried door-to-door visits, calling from a phone bank, mass mailings, but you know what? — The results from all that effort were very, very small. You know, if you ask me, I think we make this evangelism deal a whole lot harder than it has to be.

I'm sure you have all heard sermons on evangelism from this very pulpit before, and I've got to tell you--you probably won't hear anything new from me today. I think that actually speaks pretty directly to evangelism in our church today. There really *isn't* anything new!

Evangelism is like a journey we take. And what is the one thing we need to take with us when starting out on a journey? Well, this might not be true, according to the old stereotype for some of the men in the congregation today, but a **map** is *a/ways* a good thing to have when taking a journey. Especially when we sometimes get lost and need direction.

Our map is right here. It is God's Word, and the stories we read in the Bible. Over and over again, Jesus demonstrates to us how to be evangelists—how to spread the Good News to others.

Let's look at our text for today. It is a classic evangelism story, and a page of the map that we can look at to get some direction for our evangelism today.

This is a story I'll bet most of you are familiar with. A Samaritan woman is drawing water from the well when Jesus approaches her and asks her for a drink of water.

Jesus was the one who approached the woman at the well, asking her for a drink of water, and from this, their conversation began.

The woman, a Samaritan woman—a gentile, and Jesus a Jewish man, gives us another hint about evangelism. It's another signpost on our map regarding the direction we should take in our journey. It says, "turn left at that sense of comfort we have with our own cultural ideas and traditions." Put those away for a while in order to have that conversation with someone—possibly with an outsider. Take that left turn, especially when evangelizing across cultural boundaries, as I would say we need to do here in Uvalde.

How surprised this woman must have been when Jesus asked *her* for a drink of water! It would have been no secret to the readers of John's gospel the dissent that was present between the Jews and the Samaritans during those days.

"He could be anyone," the woman must've thought. But when he lifts his head and asks her for a drink, she sees the olive skin, the dark eyes, the strong nose. He is no half-breed—no Samaritan, like she is. *The man is a Jew, but what in the world is he doing there? Has he lost his way? Has he lost his faith, to be talking to her like that?* The Jews have endless rules about what they may and may not eat and drink. She knows that much at least, and she knows this man will be breaking the law if she lets him sip from her bucket.

The woman at the well and Jesus came from different cultures—to the Jews, she was an outsider. The Samaritans had different ways of honoring and worshipping God, but Jesus took the time to listen to her anyway. He did not condemn her for who she was or the things people

were saying about her. He did not put down her cultural beliefs—he merely started a simple conversation—one that honored her as a child of God and told her the Good News.

Jesus' choice of her was a curious one, because when I say outsider, I mean outsider. The woman at the well was a triple outsider. I suspect this woman had three things counting against her in this story: being a Samaritan, a woman and a 'sinner'.

Any one of those counts would be enough for some to shun her. Jesus does not. That may have been the force of the original account, which lies behind the dramatic presentation we now find. It would have been its own three-point sermon against racial, gender and moral discrimination. But as we have seen, John wants to give us more. As I have spoken before about John's texts, there is a great deal of layering in the meanings. As always in the gospel of John, its central character is God and God's gift of life through the invitation to live in the holy space of love. That love, embodied in Jesus Christ, cuts across racial and cultural prejudice, affirms women, engages and loves sinners.

The whole experience started out as a simple conversation. What a simple way to launch an evangelism campaign—asking someone for a drink of water! *Evangelism* starts out with a simple conversation.

One of the problems with our evangelism efforts today, though, lies with us thinking those we are trying to reach will come to us and ask us. If we offer enough programs at our church—if we have really dynamic speakers and preachers at our church—if we involve the community in our events, then they will ask us about Jesus Christ. That's not what happened in this story, though, is it? Jesus went to her and started a simple conversation by asking for a drink of water.

And how did the woman respond? She didn't hang around the well waiting to put together an elaborate evangelism campaign. She dropped her water jar, leaving it behind and ran back to the city—the city that had shunned her, not with the answer, but only with a question. She was a witness, not a likely witness, not even a thorough witness. But a witness excited about her experience with Christ and wanting to share what she had heard from her mysterious encounter at the well.

This unnamed Samaritan woman was the first evangelist of the Good News, and even *she* had questions. "Come and see a man who told me all that I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

That doesn't sound much like the saving souls and bringing others to Christ style of evangelism we are used to, does it? Even so, her witness is enough: it is invitational (come and see), not judgmental; it is within the

range permitted by her experience; it is honest with its own uncertainty; it is for everyone who will hear. How refreshing!

Her witness avoids trying to sell someone else's conclusions with packaged answers to unasked questions, thinly veiled ultimatums and threats of hell, and assumptions of certainty on theological matters. She does convey, however, her willingness to let her hearers arrive at their own affirmations about Jesus, and they do: "This is indeed the Savior of the world."

Our story today is one of mutuality. Jesus was in the desert at noon—he literally needed to drink fresh water to live. The woman also needed a drink: she needed the fresh, living water of grace and truth only Jesus can provide. In their various needs, these two affirm their mutual humanity. They share in the holy Source of Life that transcends all boundaries, customs, hatred, and fear.

In the desert at noon, with all distraction stripped away, all shadows erased, the light shines bright enough for these two strangers to discover that they need each other. As they are transfigured in the light of the noonday sun, each enemy sees the face of a friend. Distance dissolves into relationship. They glimpse a spiritual wholeness, a new healing reality. And, it all started out with a simple conversation.

Amen.