

March 8, 2026 Sermon Transcript
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Unbelief: How Are We Called to Care About Questions of Sex and Ethics

Our second lesson comes from the Gospel according to John. Hear what the Spirit says to the church.

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "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." The woman said to him, "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 and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. 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. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

That this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman happens at all is an altogether shocking thing. It's shocking for a Jew and a Samaritan to be talking. It's shocking for a male religious leader to talk to a woman in public. The very fact of the encounter itself is enough to tell us some really important things about the reach of Jesus's ministry.

But, and I think you'll agree with me on this, the story is also shockingly long. The author wants us to know that beyond just having happened, this story is significant for exactly what was said, how it's not that Jesus simply told a Samaritan woman that he offers living water. The author of John's gospel could have told us that in just a handful of lines. Rather, it's that he engaged her as a *bona fide* conversation partner, and we get to experience the fullness of that back and forth.

While we might consider it striking that Jesus talks to the Samaritan woman, the telling of this story in this way also highlights how the Samaritan woman chooses to engage

him right back. She courageously meets him in this boundaries-defying dialogue when she could have easily blown him off. In fact, it's she who calls upon the commonality just underneath the bitter conflict of their peoples: their shared ancestor Jacob. And she goes from this encounter to spread the news of Jesus and his living water to her people.

I can't think of a better story to fall on International Women's Day than this one. And I know that as I stand here in this pulpit today, it is because of many women before me who insisted that we belong here. It is because Jesus always entrusted women with the word—women like this unnamed woman at the well.

Jesus always entrusted women with the word. And thanks be to God.

Because I've got something to say today, in the spirit of courageous (I hope) and maybe shocking conversations. It asks us to zero in on these lines from that extended dialogue we heard, which I'll read again: *Jesus said to her, "Go call your husband and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband, for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true.'" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see you are a prophet."*

Now, I'll be honest, these lines have long troubled me. They trouble me because right as this woman asks for the living water Jesus offers... right as they finally get to the heart of this fruitful conversation they've been having... out of left field, he invokes her non-existent husband and sexual history. It *seems* like what matters in this pivotal moment suddenly becomes her connection to a man. And it *seems* like Jesus is rather sharply bringing up her sexual history at the very moment she seeks to know him.

It's certainly been interpreted that way over the years. If you ever want some colorful commentary on the Bible, you can always count on our guy John Calvin who said of this passage: *When he says that she had five husbands. The reason of this probably was that being a forced and disobedient wife, she constrained her husbands to divorce her. I, and this is Calvin speaking, interpret the words thus. Though God joined thee to lawful husbands, thou didst not cease to sin until rendered infamous by numerous divorces, thou prostitutest thyself to fornication.* That's our guy, Presbyterians.

He of course is not an outlier in focusing on the supposed promiscuity of the woman at the well. A friend recently told me he heard a youth pastor tell a group of young people to imagine having to tell Jesus, and I apologize for the crude phrasing here but I am quoting, their "body count," in an effort to encourage abstinence.

So I guess it makes sense that I would bristle at these lines in the text because of how they have in fact been interpreted and also because of the lived experience of women and sexual minorities who have been made to feel ashamed of our sexuality especially by the church and by the broader culture as influenced by the church.

It becomes easy to jump to an assumption that that's what Jesus means to do here. Accuse or even shame the woman because the church has treated women and sexual minorities and even sex itself in that very way. Many people, churched and unchurchd alike, perceive or have experienced the church as primarily concerned with policing sexual behavior. It's this idea that sexual purity is chief among Christians ethical concerns, which is largely derived from Augustine. He, you'll recall, connected sex to his concept of original sin, which has led to a shame-based, controlling framework around sexuality. Enforcement of that framework unfortunately becomes many people's primary interfacing with Christianity as a whole.

And this I think is the real shame that the gospel gets reduced to that.

We've really missed the point if we think, or cause other people to think, that the good news is about lobbing a rulebook at people, about sex or otherwise. Our faith is a liberative, lifegiving, turn-the-world-upside-down way of being. It's living water, not a tool or a weapon for gaining compliance.

So, let's look again at those lines I find difficult in today's passage. Because, you know, despite how they sound, there's actually no indication that the woman at the well feels shame at all for having heard them. She doesn't repent or plead forgiveness. She doesn't get defensive or argue against an accusation. Instead, she seems to understand Jesus on an even deeper level because of those lines. Her response is to affirm him as a prophet.

So what was the actual effect of his words then?

What I want to suggest is that Jesus is seeing and naming the source of her pain. Not accusing her of sin. Not calling her to repentance. Rather, seeing her, her whole story, and the structural causes behind that story.

We're not told the reason for her past five marriages or why she is partnered with someone she's not married to now, but in a highly patriarchal society, she wouldn't have had much if any agency over these matters. And so it's unlikely that the cause of these multiple marriages is, as Calvin phrases it, that she "constrained her husbands to

divorce her.” And more likely that her circumstances were foisted upon her by a system that objectifies and subjugates her.

While we don't know for sure, scholars have posited that she may have been caught up in what's called a levirate marriage, where a widow's brother-in-law marries her to produce an heir for the dead brother. You might recall this from the book of Ruth. And so, it may have been that she was passed off from brother to brother, viewed with reluctance as an obligation, and reduced from the fullness of her being to her childbearing function. The feeling of such reduction may resonate with some of the women in the room.

But no matter how she got there, it is without question that as an unmarried woman now, she would be disenfranchised in that society and reliant on others to care for her. Some have even suggested that the very reason she goes to the well at noon, as we heard at the beginning of the passage, is because she's been socially ostracized and forced to go at the hottest hour instead of with all the other women in the coolness of mourning. We can deduce that there is pain in her story, caused by the way the world is structured against her.

Which all makes me think that what Jesus is really saying here is, “I see how the world treats you.” He is telling her he sees her pain and understands her wholeness. As she tells people later, “he told me everything I had ever done.” Which is a way to say he knew her story. So I invite you to imagine his words said with the boundless compassion of Christ instead of the shaming accusatory tone of the world. And I think we get a lot closer to understanding how this rich dialogue actually progressed.

“I see how the world treats you. And in the midst of it all, I see you and I offer you living water.” It is a message to the ones hurt by the world and it is a message to each one of us.

Now, the process of wrestling with Jesus's words here, I think, helps us rethink how we as the church are called to care about questions of sex and ethics. It gets at that question of unbelief you've been exploring this season. What do we need to unbelieve so we can know Jesus better and have a richer faith? I think it's time to unbelieve a shame-based, rules-oriented, and controlling sexual ethic.

Now, let me be clear. This is not to say that the church should not care about questions of sex and ethics. We absolutely should. It's just that we should care about them differently than we have. We should care about the impact of our actions, norms, and structures on others and ourselves.

And our exploration of the Samaritan woman at the well is instructive to this point. It moves us away from the idea that Jesus ever asks us to assess and judge another person's sexual purity and instead towards seeing and responding to pain.

Because there's a lot of pain in the world around sex, its misuse, and its abuse. The church's historic focus on who's "allowed" to have sex with whom, I think, misses the much more essential and consequential questions of how we treat one another and how worldly power corrupts the good gifts of God, including the gift of sexuality.

I really felt convicted to preach about this admittedly tabooed subject in part because of news lately revealing the unspeakable harms that men in immense positions of power and authority have in coordination with each other inflicted against women and children. We who believe that Jesus came to cast the mighty from their thrones should obviously care about this abusive depravity festering in the upper echelons of our society. We should care that an entire class of people knew about it, joked about it, and let it continue. The church needs to talk about and faithfully respond to this.

But lest we think this is some faroff matter concerning only billionaires and private jets and islands, we also need to confront how shamebased controlling sexual ethic itself has perpetuated harm all around and within us. Women and LGBTQ folks have felt this especially, but no one is immune. I imagine we have all been harmed and we have all caused harm when it comes to shame and sex. And that can be through thought, word, or deed. Not all of these harms necessarily rise to the level of sexual violence, though it is certainly a serious and pervasive harm. It's also about ways we've perpetuated harmful shame towards others and towards ourselves. How we've failed to honor our partners and ourselves. How we've lacked open and honest communication about sex. And how we've elevated leaders despite their conduct.

There is pain in it all, tied up in how we do sexuality. And that pain is what we ought to care about. Pain is found in many heterosexual married relationships that follow all the so-called rules. And there are also plenty of caring, lifegiving, and I'd say holy expressions of sexuality that defy those rules. Yet, they carry the pain of societal shame.

The church should care less about the rules and more about the pain.

We should look at how power is structured to perpetuate that pain. And we should rethink what matters when it comes to these questions just as we rethought the meaning of Jesus's words to the Samaritan woman. I think we'll find that the faithful

answer is always in Christ's boundless compassion. That of the one who sees us, who knows our stories, and offers us all living water.

Amen.