

BELIEVE: A Samaritan Woman

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, March 12, 2023.

John 4:5-42

I want to begin this morning with a baseball story, because, as the baseball fans among us know, Major League Baseball teams are in the midst of Spring Training right now. The Cactus League is playing in Arizona and the Grapefruit League is playing in Florida. It's an exciting time for baseball fans, filled with anticipation for the new baseball season, which begins March 30—Opening Day.

I'm a native New Yorker. I grew up outside of New York City in the suburbs of Long Island, and my baseball team was the New York Mets. When I was 14 years old, the Mets were having a tough summer. The team fell into last place in the National League East division and stayed there until the end of August. It was a sad summer for Mets fans!

But then, on August 31, pitcher Tug McGraw led the Mets to victory in extra innings over the St. Louis Cardinals. It was a turning point for the Mets that season. From that moment on, the Mets started winning. By September 21, they had pulled into first place, beating the Pittsburgh Pirates 10-2. And on the final day of the season they actually clinched the division title!

"Ya Gotta Believe!" became the popular rallying cry for the Mets that year. Tug McGraw coined the famous phrase at a time when he may have been the only one to believe that the Mets could actually make it to the World Series. But soon enough, hearing McGraw say it again and again, and seeing him do his magic in the ninth inning, the Mets themselves came to believe it as well. The Mets won the National League Championship that year against the Cincinnati Reds and went on to play in the World Series against the Oakland A's.

"Ya Gotta Believe!" It may have started out as a rallying cry for Mets fans, but for me, today, I think of it as a rallying cry for Christian believers everywhere! Ya gotta believe . . . in the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ! Ya gotta believe . . . in the love of God! Ya gotta believe . . . in the communion of the Holy Spirit! For with God, all things are possible.

In contemporary usage, "to believe" has come to mean giving assent to a set of ideas or propositions, making a commitment to a "belief system." When we speak of Christian belief we tend to have in mind a set of religious doctrines to which Christians subscribe—that God is one in three persons, for example, or that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine. But prior to the 17th century, "to believe" had a much richer meaning. The phrase "I believe" is the English translation of the Latin word *credo*. *Credo* is a compound word. The first part comes from the Latin root word *cor* or *cordia*, meaning "heart" (from which we get the English words "cordial," "accord," and "concord"). The second part of *credo* comes from the Latin word *do* meaning "put," "place," "set," or "give." So, the root meaning of *credo* is "I set my heart on" or "I give my heart to" or "I commit myself to."

So, to say "I believe in God" or "I believe in Jesus Christ" is not so much to say that I believe certain propositions about them, but that "I set my heart on God" or "I give my heart to Jesus Christ." I am committed to them with all that I have and all that I am. "To believe" in this sense is a matter of faith. It's a matter of trust.

The writer of the Gospel of John believed in Jesus, and it was his explicit purpose in writing the Fourth Gospel to persuade others to believe as well. Near the end of the book, in chapter 20, he writes: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Indeed, if we wanted to encapsulate the message of John's Gospel in one word it would be "BELIEVE." And that is our chosen theme for worship this Lenten season. We're looking at stories of people who had close encounters with Jesus and came to believe.

Last Sunday, Catherine Robinson looked at the encounter between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus, in which there was a lot of confusion and misunderstanding between them. But that encounter isn't the last time we hear about Nicodemus. He appears again in the seventh chapter of John, where we find him defending Jesus to his Pharisee colleagues, who want Jesus arrested. "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" Nicodemus asks. As you might imagine, his question is not well-received. "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?" they reply. "Search [the scriptures] and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee." Sticking up for Jesus didn't win Nicodemus any points among his Pharisee friends.

Nicodemus appears a third time in John, after Jesus has been crucified. He joins Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body with spices, wrapping

his body in linen cloths, and laying him in a tomb. Who could have imagined that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, would be one of the two people preparing Jesus' body for burial? In John we never hear Nicodemus proclaim his faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. But I would say Nicodemus' actions speak much louder than words ever could. His sticking up for Jesus to other Pharisees and his direct involvement in Jesus' burial -- at great personal risk to himself -- demonstrated his tremendous love and care for Jesus.

This morning's story looks at an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. It's around noontime, when the sun is high in the sky and the day is at its hottest. A Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water, and Jesus asks her for a drink. In doing so, Jesus is crossing over the conventional social boundaries of his day. His disciples are astonished to find Jesus speaking with a woman. Jewish men did not go around having casual conversations with unknown women! And yet, here Jesus was doing exactly that, and in public, no less! What was he thinking! What's more, he was talking with a Samaritan woman, which was even worse. As John points out, "Jews [did] not share things in common with Samaritans." In Jesus' day there was a long-standing enmity between Jews and Samaritans. They didn't interact. They kept their distance. So, for Jesus to be talking with a Samaritan woman shows the radically inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry.

We don't know if the Samaritan woman ever gives Jesus the drink of water he asked for. They get caught up in conversation and the story moves on. Jesus speaks of "living water," which the woman understands to be "live-giving water" or "running water" like that of a babbling brook. She is still thinking in physical terms. But Jesus is speaking in spiritual terms. Jesus offers the Samaritan woman living water that promises to satisfy her spiritual thirst.

The Samaritan woman was thirsty. That's what brought her to Jacob's well -- to draw some water. But we learn that there were other things going on at a deeper level in her life. She had had five husbands, and was now living with a man who was not her husband. Was this an indication of some deep spiritual need in her life that she had been trying to fill with men, but without success? I wonder.

Jesus offers her living water. "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty again," Jesus says. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." This is Jesus as thirst quencher! Jesus offers us living water that promises to satisfy our spiritual thirsts.

All of us have deep spiritual needs -- the need for community, for love, for acceptance, for self-worth, for purpose, for hope. But when our spiritual needs go unmet, we often try to meet them in ways that do not satisfy. We try to meet them through the pursuit of pleasure or by accumulating wealth or seeking greater power or elevating our status. But no matter how much pleasure, wealth, power, or status we have, it's never enough. We always thirst for more. The problem is we're trying to fill a God-shaped hole with things other than God, and they don't fit. Only God can quench the spiritual thirst that we feel. As Augustine of Hippo put it, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and we cannot find rest until we find it in Thee."

Jesus comes to us in the dry and parched places in our lives to offer us life-giving water that can refresh us, renew us, and restore us to new life. When we are tired and overworked and feel we have nothing more of ourselves to give, we can find rest in Jesus. When we are sad and depressed and feel like we will never be ourselves again, we can find solace in Jesus' loving embrace. When we are sick or injured, we can find comfort in Jesus' healing touch. When we are in conflict with a friend, family member, or coworker, we can find peace in Jesus' quiet presence. When we feel isolated and alone, we can find a friend in Jesus.

The story continues with the Samaritan woman leaving her water jar at the well and going back to the city to tell others in her community about Jesus. Many Samaritans come to believe in Jesus because of the woman's testimony. Some follow her back out to the well to meet Jesus for themselves. And they invite him to stay with them in the city for a couple of days. After some time with Jesus, listening to him for themselves, many more come to believe that Jesus is "truly the Savior of the world."

There are people in this city – right here in Albuquerque -- who are thirsty, who have unmet spiritual needs. If they only knew that Jesus could meet their spiritual needs. If they only knew about his living water that could finally quench their thirst. Like the Samaritan woman, we need to reach out to our community, to our friends and neighbors, and invite them to "come and see."

So, let's spread the word to those who are thirsty. Albuquerque may have lots of watering holes, but they can't quench your thirst like Christ can. Come to St. Andrew where you'll find an oasis of living water in an urban desert, and you may never be thirsty again. Amen.