

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday of Lent
Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday
Sunday, March 8, 2026
Scripture: Matthew 5: 1-12; John 4: 5-42
Sermon: Have Mercy

Today's story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is one of my favorite stories. The story starts with Jesus sitting alone by a well, when a woman approaches to draw water. John tells us that it is about noon. Immediately we know that there is something wrong in this woman's life. She is coming to the well in the heat of the day, rather than in the cool of the dawn or early evening. She is coming alone, rather than with the other women of the village. This woman is an outsider, isolated from her community and yet Jesus, a Jewish man, asks her for a drink.

The woman is naturally astonished and asks: 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' Her gender nor her nationality matter to Jesus. Jesus speaks with her as a human being, not as a 'Samaritan woman'. Jesus relates to her as a teacher to a disciple. He tells the woman that he can offer her 'living water'. The woman responds: 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

When Jesus tells the woman that he knows she has no husband, but that she has had five in the past and is now living with a man who is not her husband the woman instantly asks him a theological question. This woman has obviously been pondering how to worship God properly for a long time: where is the right place to worship?; are the Samaritans or the Jews right? Suddenly, she comes across a prophet, someone who might have the answer, and so she immediately asks him.

This is one of the reasons that this story is my favorite; because of the eagerness of this woman to learn, an eagerness that leads her to ignore the strangeness of the whole encounter or anything Jesus says about her personal life. And Jesus answers her question. He talks theology with her, taking her desire to learn seriously, 'the hour is coming, and is now here,

when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.’ Then he announces to the woman who he is, the Messiah for whom the woman has been waiting.

‘Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that Jesus was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”’ It is interesting that the disciples are more shocked that Jesus is talking with a woman than that he’s talking with a Samaritan. Their response reminds us just how extraordinary Jesus’ interactions with women were in the world in which he lived. Jesus had women disciples, who accompanied him and supported him and were present at his death. Jesus allowed Mary of Bethany to sit at his feet in the position of a student. And Jesus has his longest theological discussion with this Samaritan woman.

Another reason I like this story is because it tells us of one of the first Christian evangelists. The Samaritan woman had been isolated, shunned by the people of her city. Maybe no one would marry her because she was seen to be bad luck, a woman whose husbands have all died. Maybe as a childless widow she had no choice but to live with a man who was not her husband if she wanted to survive. We do not know the full story of her life, we only know that she is shunned by her community, to the extent that she comes to the well at noon. And we know that none of that matters when she returns to the city to tell her community about Jesus and to begin the process that brings them to faith. They listen to her; they meet Jesus themselves; and they come to believe: ‘that this is truly the Saviour of the world.’

This is a wonderful story. Jesus’ interaction with this woman is not restricted by her gender or her nationality; she gets an answer to her theological question; and an entire Samaritan village comes to faith. This is something to celebrate, and the Samaritan woman is rightly remembered as one of Christianity’s earliest evangelists.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

This woman immediately accepts that Jesus is the Messiah and evangelises on his behalf to her community. I particularly like her evangelistic process: ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ She does not simply tell her

community who Jesus is; she invites them to discover his identity for themselves. And they do! '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 Saviour of the world.'

Her story reminds us that Christianity has always been the faith of the outsiders, the over-looked and excluded. If we ever worry that our own situation, or things we have in our past, might exclude us from being part of the people of God, we can remember the faith of this Samaritan woman.

In this passage, we see a beautiful picture of faith in action. This woman, once an outcast, becomes a vessel of good news because of her encounter with Jesus. It's a testament to the power of faith and the transformation it brings.

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The woman's transformation: She went from being an outcast, living in shame and isolation, to becoming a messenger of the good news of Jesus Christ. This transformation was not due to her own efforts or merits, but due to her faith in Jesus. When Jesus revealed to her that He was the Messiah, she believed Him. Her faith grew to a personal conviction. This is the power of faith. It transforms us, it changes us, it makes us new.

The transformative power of faith. It not only changes us internally, but it also changes our actions and our interactions with others.

The impact the woman had on her community: She was so transformed by her encounter with Jesus that she couldn't keep it to herself. She went back to her town and told others about Jesus, and many believed because of her testimony. This shows the ripple effect of faith. When one person's life is transformed by faith, it can lead to the transformation of many others. The woman at the well, once an outcast, became a vessel through which the good news of Jesus was spread.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Those who love the unlovable, who take time for their enemies. Do you know what the most important expression of mercy is? Especially in marriage, in the family, in the church? Forgiveness! As we pray forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us (Matthew 6:9-13). God has shown mercy to you, by not punishing you as your sins deserve (Psalm 103:10). How could you not reflect his mercy to others by not holding grudges, and not waiting for a chance to get revenge? Only believers can

understand this verse. Unbelievers cannot understand mercy, not really. When unbelievers are wronged, they seek revenge. Because only the merciful can receive mercy. Only those who know God's mercy in Christ can be merciful to others.

Psalm 136:1-9 is a litany to God's mercy to us:

Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good!

For His mercy endures forever.

2 Oh, give thanks to the God of gods!

For His mercy endures forever.

3 Oh, give thanks to the Lord of lords!

For His mercy endures forever:

4 To Him who alone does great wonders,

For His mercy endures forever;

5 To Him who by wisdom made the heavens,

For His mercy endures forever;

6 To Him who laid out the earth above the waters,

For His mercy endures forever;

7 To Him who made great lights,

For His mercy endures forever—

8 The sun to rule by day,

For His mercy endures forever;

9 The moon and stars to rule by night,

For His mercy endures forever.

Central to all of Jesus' teachings and actions was his attitude of showing mercy and teaching forgiveness which is the key to human relationships and our relationship with Jesus. Can you recall a time when you were given mercy by another person?

Offering others unmerited love, offering others mercy, is the authentic hallmark of a Spirit-filled Christian. **Mercy** is not receiving the punishment or negative consequences that we do deserve for our actions, while **Grace**

is receiving the positive blessings, favor, and salvation that you do not deserve.

To understand what mercy really means, to understand what forgiveness means we need to look at the cross on which Jesus died.

Just as the woman at the well believed and ran to her community and said “Come and See the Messiah!” so are we also to tell others that God is merciful and gives us living water. **Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy!**

God’s mercy endures forever.

We all thirst for God, whether we know it or not. And until our thirst is quenched by God, we will run from well to well and drink and drink and never quench our thirst. We will drink from the wells found in this world: food, money, pleasure, power, wealth, security; and we will still find ourselves thirsty. We will be like a person stranded in the middle of the ocean: water everywhere we look, but nothing to quench our thirst. “Everyone who drinks of this water,” Jesus says, “will be thirsty again; but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.”