

# HIGH NOON

John 4:1-15

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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I recently watched a film adaptation of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, a critique of the rigid social order in England during the Regency period. Then as now, if you wanted to be included in society, you had to be seen at the right parties with the right people and the right clothes. Of course, having a lot of money trumped everything else.

Sounds like high school, doesn't it?

In the Kingdom of God, being seen with the right people in the right clothes and having lots of money is a pretty superficial way of measuring the worth of another human being. But that's the way things were then and that's the way things are now.

Before going to the story, let's set the stage with some context of life in the Middle East when Jesus walked the earth.

First, the story's setting. Second the place of women in Middle Eastern society and third, the Samaritan woman's unfortunate reputation.

First, the setting: Samaria and the people who lived there: even though they were ethnic cousins, the Jews in Judea look down on the Samaritans.

The Samaritans were the descendants of those Jews who broke away from the House of David and formed the Northern Kingdom one thousand years earlier. When Israel (or the Northern Kingdom) fell to the Assyrians during the eighth century BC, the Israelites intermarried with the Gentiles. Not surprisingly, the full-blooded Jews of Judea treated the Samaritans as outcasts.

Second, the place of women in Jesus time: legally and culturally, women were second-class citizens with no rights. Wives had to walk three steps behind their husbands, who never spoke to their wives in public.

There was a popular saying back then, especially among the Pharisees:

"I thank the Lord I'm not a dog, a woman or a Samaritan." Enough said.

Which brings us to the third thing to know before getting into the story. This Samaritan Woman was an outcast among outcasts because of her scandalous life.

Now we can move on.

Jesus was in Judea when he decided to take a shortcut through Samaria to get back home to Galilee. This just wasn't done. Jews were taught from childhood that even casual contact with a Samaritan would make them ritually unclean.

When Jesus and his disciples came to a well, he sent them on ahead to purchase food while he rested. Before long, the woman showed up only to be shocked when a Jew started talking to her even though she was not only a Samaritan but a woman too.

We soon discover she had a bad reputation in the village for being married and divorced five times. That explains why she fetched her water at noon, the hottest time of the day. No one else would be there to taunt and insult her.

There's no indication she was dishonest or despicable but her life was certainly a mess. In her personal relationships, most likely beginning with her parents, chances are no one ever gave her what she needed most, unconditional love and continuous affirmation. If this is true, until she met Jesus, she probably never experienced any of these things.

Immediately shocked Jesus would even acknowledge her presence, she was equally astonished when he spoke kindly treated her with respect and as an equal.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber wrote extensively on what he called the, "I, thou" relationship. In authentic relationships, when we welcomed each other as friends, the Spirit of God has room to transform our relationships into the brand of friendship of enjoyed within the kingdom of God.

Personal experience leads you to know this to be true. Think about those important, "I, thou" relationships in your lifetime. Perhaps you can remember a time you felt like an outcast until someone invited you into her circle of friends. You may also remember a time you reached out to someone who felt like an outcast to be your friend. By doing God's will on earth, as it is in heaven, you took another step closer into the kingdom of God.

But there's something else going on here. Jesus and his disciples were on a long journey from Judea to Galilee. Being worn out from his ministry of signs and wonders, Jesus took that shortcut through Samaria.

After being surprised when Jesus asked for water, the Samaritan woman immediately gave it to him. Her kindness reminded me of those related verses in Matthew's Gospel, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink," and, "Whatever you do for the least of these, you also do it to me."

You see, in our "I, thou" relationships, whenever you perform any deed of kindness for someone who can't pay you back, your kindness touches Jesus. This is especially true when you reach out to touch people far from home with no helpers.

In Leviticus 19: 33 we read, “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizens among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

Curiously, it was Jesus and not the Samaritan woman who was the alien in a strange land and it was she who loved the alien as herself. Her treatment of Jesus is instructive for us today.

One of the divisive issues in our nation today is what we should do with the illegal aliens living among us. There are those who say we should let everybody in who wants to live in our country because America is the last best hope for freedom. Others point out we’ve always had laws governing immigration and anyone is welcome who’s willing to submit to these laws and become legal, loyal citizens.

There’s a bevy of other arguments on both sides, some strong, some weak, but it’s not my intention to argue on one side or another because it’s not the preachers task to present personal opinions as the Word of God.

Instead, my task is to suggest we pray all very hard for our leaders in Washington to come to their senses, stop playing politics (on both sides!) and honestly work out a fair and just a solution on immigration in keeping with Christ’s Sermon on the Mount.

Let’s return to that scripture from Leviticus which the scribes and Pharisees obviously ignored since they deplored and isolated themselves from the foreigners living in their land.

“The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizens among you; you shall love the alien as yourself...” (another way of putting it, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”)

Before Christians can take a stand on any issue, it’s mandatory to take into consideration Jesus life, ministry, death and resurrection in the context of the emerging kingdom of God. That means seeing the world not as it is, but as it could be and will be when God’s will is done.

“Love God, love your neighbor and yourself,” and “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is the high standard Jesus set for us to live by. When we do this, God’s kingdom comes nearer than we think.

So what’s the Christians calling in these things? This isn’t just a theoretical question. Remember, Christians are called to take on the radical, kingdom lifestyle transcending politics and social norms. Instead of relying on polling results, people of goodwill should be asking, what would Jesus do if he were in our place? Of course, Jesus is in our place because Jesus lives within and through us, if we let him.

You probably don’t know this, but living under the radar in the apartments across the street are aliens from foreign lands. Whether or not they’re legal or illegal, I don’t know. All I do know is they’re human beings created in the image of God. Some of them came to this country to make a better life for their children or escape violence and persecution. They all came here because they were told America is the land of freedom and justice.

Of course, it can't be ignored that illegal immigrants broke our laws. Is that fair to those who obey our immigration laws and patiently wait years for citizenship? That leads to another question, are the immigration laws on the books from the founding of our nation unjust, or does any nation have the right to protect its borders and have immigration laws? It's a complicated issue, not easily solved.

As I said just a few minutes ago, Presbyterian preachers never had the authority to force their personal opinions on their congregations. Thankfully, there's a better way.

The great theologian Karl Barth once said, "When a preacher prepares sermon it should be with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other." That simply means putting the great issues affecting the world God loves under the authority of God's word. Another way of putting it: "What would Jesus have us do?"

One of the main tenants of Reformed Christianity is, "Jesus Christ alone is Lord of the conscience." That means no one in authority can tell you what to think or believe. Instead we are responsible for discerning God's will through, prayer and scripture within the beloved community. That's one of the glories our Reformed Christian tradition. That's one of the reasons why I became a Presbyterian.

Therefore, the one thing I can ask of you in good conscience is to consider this: A stranger in a strange land, a Jew in Samaria, reached out to a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. He was tired, far from home, weak and vulnerable. A native of that land gave him something to drink. It wasn't a big thing. It was a small gesture, but her kindness was recorded in one of the four Gospels for a special reason.

Question: How does this encounter at high noon showing Jesus, an alien in a strange land at the mercy of a Samaritan woman inform our faith?

According to John, Jesus came in the flesh so we wouldn't perish but have eternal life. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us so we will know the truth setting us free to see the world as it could be and will be when God's kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let's pray that people of goodwill everywhere, whether Christian or not, will permit themselves to be informed by the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount that promise to transform our world into a kinder, saner place to live as we wait for God's kingdom to come.