

**G.O.A.T.: The Greatest Healer**  
**John 4:4-10**  
**March 13, 2022**  
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In 1998, we moved from Edina to Brentwood, Tennessee, a suburb of Nashville. On the first Sunday that I participated in worship, a woman greeted me afterwards and said, "I like your accent." I, of course, had never thought about having an accent. She often greeted me after worship by saying, "I like your accent." I was never really sure by the way she said that, if my not being southern was a good thing or not. By looking at me, you couldn't tell I was not from around there, but all I had to say were three words, and it was obvious. One of our daughters adapted quickly and soon spoke as if she had lived in Tennessee her entire life. And it helped her fit in. But two and a half years later when we moved to Plymouth, her southern accent made her different and it prompted a nickname which she hated. And so, she very quickly dropped the accent. But some differences are not so easily erased, nor should they be.

Do you know what it is not to fit in? Sometimes it's skin color or ethnicity, a disability or physical appearance. It could be an illness, maybe it's the lack of a certain ability (everyone else can do it, why can't you). Or maybe it's something you've done and everyone around you knows it. It could be assumptions that others have made of you and thought it's not true, it's as if people see you with a label across your chest – different. There's this expression: You are known by the company you keep. So maybe we avoid certain people. We live in a world where words and labels get used to marginalize or push other people down. They are not us. We are better than.

At the time of Jesus, there was a word for this *am-ha'arets*. It is a Hebrew word that means "people of the land." In the Old Testament, when the Israelites entered the Promised Land, the people already living there were *am-ha'arets*, people of the land. You know – not like us. The Israelites were the faithful people, the believers, the righteous. And everyone else was *am-ha'arets*. And yet, when we meet Jesus, he is drawn to the people everyone else excludes. He goes out of his way to include and to love those whom others would reject.

We are in this series in which we are looking for what makes Jesus the Greatest Of All Time. As we read the Gospel of John, we find story after story that redefines greatness. And if we would be his disciples, his hands and feet – to reflect what we see in him into the world around us – it would change the world. The darkness that still exists would disappear. The brokenness would be healed. This morning, I want to look at how Jesus went out of his way to bring healing and wholeness to one person – and how that lesson show us what true greatness means.

This morning, I want to focus on the story found in John, chapter 4, and the conversation Jesus had with a Samaritan woman. It was wrong on so many levers! Today, Samaritan has become a name synonymous with acts of mercy, but ironically in the first century, Jews considered Samaritans the worst kind of outcast. In Luke's gospel, Jesus told a parable where a Samaritan stopped to help a Jew in desperate need of help when other Jews had ignored him. The reason the Samaritan's act was so socking to Jesus' listeners also helps us understand this morning's scripture.

Israel was divided into two regions: Judea in the south, Galilee in the north, and between them, Samaria. Today, the area of Samaria is roughly what we know as the West Bank. If we were traveling Galilee to Judea, it would seem natural and the shortest route to go through Samaria, but there was animosity between Samaritans and Jews that Jews traveled along the east bank of the Jordan River to Jericho and then up the hill to Jerusalem. To travel through Samaria, a

Jew risked being attacked. But this time, Jesus went straight through Samaritan territory. John says: **Jesus had to go through Samaria.** We are about to learn something about Jesus and why he would go where no one else would go. They are traveling through Samaria. It is the middle of the day. They stop at Jacob's well, and Jesus sends his disciples into town to find food. Jesus remains all alone at the well when a Samaritan woman arrives to get water from the well. There is something terribly wrong with this picture.

First of all, Jesus was a Jewish rabbi. In that culture a devout Jewish man would not allow himself to be alone with a woman, and if it was unavoidable, he certainly would not have entered into conversation with her. The risk of impurity and gossip and immorality was too great. When I was growing up there was a church in our small town that forbid dancing and whenever gym class included a unit on ballroom dancing, the kids from the church sat out. The church felt the risk of immorality was too great when a young man and a young woman stood close enough to touch. But Jesus says to the woman: **Give me some water to drink.** Jesus starts talking to her – something his own disciples find shocking when they return to see what Jesus is doing.

She is not only a woman but a Samaritan woman. After the death of king Solomon, Israel divided into the northern kingdom with 10 tribes and the southern kingdom with two tribes. It remained that way until 722 BC when the Assyrian Empire invaded from the north and crushed the northern kingdom of Israel. Most of the people were taken into exile, scattered throughout the Empire, remarried and lost their identity forever. But a few remained. So, Assyria sent people to intermarry the Jews who remained, and they became the Samaritans. The Samaritans continued to embrace the Jewish faith but with some changes. Later, in 586 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah was defeated by the Babylonians, the people taken into exile and when the Jews from the southern kingdom finally returned, they discovered the Samaritans. The Samaritans had intermarried, and they had changed some of the religious practices, and so they were rejected. They were not the true followers in the tradition of Abraham and Moses. The Samaritans were *am-ha'arets*. And at the time of Jesus, Jews would go out of their way to avoid any and all contact, and yet here is Jesus, asking the woman for a drink.

If the first two issues weren't enough, there was a third. The well was outside of town. The normal time to come to the well was early in the morning when it was cooler. But this woman has come at the hottest time of the day – a time when no one else would be there. She was not welcome with the other women. Everyone knew her past. Somehow even Jesus does. She has been married and divorced five times. Five times she had been given a writ of divorce. And now she is living with a man who would not even cover her with the social protection of marriage. She was not wanted. She was the one that everyone else in town whispered about and avoided. For a people who were considered outcasts, she was the outcasts' outcast. What are we learning about Jesus from the company he keeps? Jesus asks for a drink of water only to tell the woman that she should have asked him for one. That would never happen. She was *am-ha'arets*! She knew that. She was the outcasts' outcast. Jesus says: **"If you recognized God's gift and who is saying to you, 'Give me some water to drink,' you would be asking him and he would give you living water."** What Jesus is offering is new life – the same new life that Jesus offers everyone. And by the end of their conversation, she has become the first evangelist to the Samaritan people. She does what even Jesus' own disciples did not do when they went into town for food. She tells everyone what Jesus has done for her. If we are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we must be people who reach out, who include, or as I say at the end of every worship – to be for "those to whom love is a stranger, a most generous friend." It is the healing power of love and acceptance.

Jesus was presenting a very different picture of who God is. The religious people saw God as holy and righteous and without sin – and so they did everything possible to separate themselves

from win and anyone they considered sinful, unclean, or untouchable. Stay away from the *am-ha'arets*. You don't want to get what they have. You don't want to be associated with their kind. Or, as we've seen in recent news stories from athletic events – denigrating others to proclaim our own superiority. And yet, that's not who God is. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, **God does not have favorites.** (Romans 2:11)

This weekend and next, we are presenting a musical that delivers much the same message. Is anyone outside God's love and acceptance? And if no one is, then as Jesus' followers, no one ought to be outside our love and acceptance. No one.

The musical tells the story first written by the Danish writer Hans Christian Anderson in 1843. When the story begins, a mother duck's eggs hatch. One of the little birds is perceived by the other birds and animals on the farm as an ugly little creature and suffers much verbal and physical abuse from them. They say, why doesn't the cat just eat him. And throughout the story, the cat attempts to do just that. He wanders sadly from the barnyard and lives with wild geese until hunters slaughter the flocks. He finds a home with an old woman, but her cat and hen tease and taunt him mercilessly, and once again he sets off alone. All he wants is to be accepted. Eventually, he come across a flock of wild swans. He is shocked when the swans welcome and accept him, only to realize he's not ugly after all. What I see in the story is that the healing come from inside out when he is loved and accepted. Hans Christian Anderson was asked why didn't write an autobiography, and he replied that he already had. It's this story.

There's a song that becomes a thread woven throughout the musical. *I'm just different, But I have a sense of pride. My looks may, well, be funny But I hurt the same inside. Different isn't spiteful, Different isn't wrong! So, why is it so hard to get along? I only want to get along! Different isn't hateful, Different could be swell. Different, is just... Well... Different.*

And what we see at the end of the musical and at the end of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well is the joy of being found, the joy of being accepted, the healing power of being loved. For a short time, I worked with a pastor who greeted the congregation every Sunday with these words: *Good morning, beautiful people.* What I witnessed was that people were changed by that – because that's who you are – a beautiful creation of God.

This week is the beginning of March Madness. I remember when I was playing basketball that whenever there was a time out, we'd run off the court and huddle together around the coach. He would update the game plan because he could see what we could not see. He'd point out what we weren't doing, and then we would all put our hands together in the center. We were renewing our commitment to work together. But we didn't stay in the huddle. We went back on the court to get in the game. Will we? Will we get in the game? This worship experience is the huddle. This faith is not to keep to ourselves. God loves all people. Let's get in the game. And that's true greatness.