

On the Rise: Seeing, Pouring, Singing
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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Fourth Sunday of Easter

For Reflection: *“There are many in the world dying for a piece of bread, but there are many more dying for a little love.” Mother Teresa*

Hebrew Scripture: *Isaiah 43.5-15*

⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

⁸Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! ⁹Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them declared this, and foretold to us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, “It is true.” ¹⁰You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. ¹¹I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. ¹²I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses, says the LORD. ¹³I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand; I work and who can hinder it?

Gospel Reading: *John 4:1-41*

⁴Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” ²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— ³he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The 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.) ¹⁰Jesus 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.” ¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but 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.” ¹⁵The 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship

what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But 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. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just 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?” ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him. ³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³²But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵Do 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. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.” ³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word.

Meditation: *On the Rise: Seeing, Pouring, Singing*

I don’t keep records, but it is entirely possible I have preached sermons shorter than this morning’s reading from the gospel of John. That is not a criticism of the story. We too often lament all the things left out of a Bible story; we might like to know to complain when the details are provided.

Yet, given the passage’s length, its wide-ranging conversation and cast of characters, it presents many preaching challenges—too much of a muchness. Choices must be made. The criteria—what speaks, what liturgical season we are in, what is the situation in the congregation, community, nation or world—all impact where a preacher is led and influence choices.

There are a number of factors which influenced this morning’s message. As a congregation, nation and world, we are, or we hope we are, exiting the darkest days of the pandemic. In our hemisphere, we are enjoying more sunshine, milder weather, the opportunity to be outside and together more freely and often.

As a people of faith, we are in the midst of Eastertide—that liturgical season which reminds us that the resurrection was not one and done. The season invites us to continue our joyous celebration, to open our eyes to the wonder of possibility of life with God not just for a day but all year long. In our congregation, we are “enjoying” an Eastertide sermon series, *On the Rise*, exploring how we might bring the uplift of Easter, springtime and post-pandemic life to bear on our mission and ministry. The texts chosen for this series, as is the one today, are recommended texts for congregations focusing on rising, becoming stronger and more vital, not only post-pandemic, but in light of all the challenges the church in the world faces these days.

Those are the lenses which impacted what I saw in this week’s text. One of the first things that struck me was that, while it’s generally easy to choose one character in these stories and study it from their perspective, as hard as I tried, I could not anchor myself to one. One minute I was that woman, the next I was a disciple, and in another, the woman’s community. As you know, I avoid putting us in Jesus’ role, but again, this was a different experience. I was struck by his need to correct expectations and interpretations of his ministry—much like Christians are called to do in our part of the world today.

The first take-away is that people on the rise need to be flexible in our ministry, roles and viewpoints: sometimes we are the seen, sometimes, the ones who see, sometimes, the questioners or doubters, sometimes, the served, sometimes the servant, sometimes the explainers and sometimes the proclaimers. There is nothing wrong with any of those roles or people, but we weaken or paralyze our ministry if we lock

ourselves into position, no matter what. Brittleness is not strength. It is an invitation to be broken. To avoid that, today we focus on shifting roles and perspective in the text.

The first reversal in the story is that the servant savior asks to be served by not only a woman but someone from a usually separate cultural group. She is the one called to serve or not, accept difference or not. She does both. We often don't realize those are two-way demands. We are not the only ones called to grow, change and stretch.

One of the dominant themes in the story is that the woman is profoundly impacted by the experience of being truly seen and accepted for who she is. Perhaps, paradoxically, being seen allows her to see Jesus for who he really is. If we want to be seen for our authentic selves, particularly our authentic selves as Christians, first we need to see people for who they are. I suspect this may be more difficult than we think. I believe that we (and certainly not us alone) have divided the world into two groups—us and them. Not the divisions that might first occur to us—political parties, not people of different religions, ethnicities, races or sexual orientation. Our congregation may well have less defined lines in those areas than most—all to the good. I believe the two groups are the servants (that's us) and the served.

No doubt many will rush to object. We are serving people who have fallen on hard times, who have economic, generational, medical or educational challenges, often not of their own making, but that doesn't make us different—we are all human. No argument.

Yet... As does just about every other mainline congregation, we are constantly talking about, wondering and worrying about the need to strengthen our ministry, enhance our numbers and grow into a new day.

I would like everyone to close their eyes for a moment and picture the people you see joining us in ministry if we are to have the vibrant life we all hope for. Do they look like us? I don't mean ethnicity, race or nationality or sexual orientation. I mean, "Do we picture people with our advantages of education and economics, the other families whose children go to school with ours, the people who work or golf, who belong to the garden or historical societies with us or go to the same concerts we do?" There is no problem with that ... as long as they aren't the only ones in the picture.

Eyes still closed. If they are not already there, can you paint into your picture the people we serve? Folks who are assisted by the food pantry or SNAP benefits? The extraordinary number of households in our community literally battered by domestic violence? Those so in despair that substance abuse seems the only spiritual salvation? Despair is also rampant in our community. Those with medical disabilities and others? Can you see them in the picture, not as recipients of our ministry, but as valuable partners in it?

...

You may open your eyes.

This text reminds us, encourages us, demands of us that we recognize that we are all served and servant, valuable in the eyes of the Lord as both. It reminds us that those who would be truly seen for whom they are, especially in this day and age for Christians, will begin by seeing who others truly are. It reminds us that the ones who find themselves seen, known, and accepted will spread the word of hope and promise.

The vision of strengthened, vital, hopeful ministry begins with an expanded vision of who our partners are or can be. It begins with a willingness to be both the known and the ones who know; the ones who accept difference and are accepted for how different we are; the ones who pour and the ones who receive a drink; the ones who sing praise to God and belief in the Lord and the ones who are sung to.

The text reminds us that if we are to expand our ministry, we must first expand our self-perception and our perception of others. The text reminds us that if we are to expand our ministry, we must first expand our vision of who we are and who we might yet become, by the power and grace of God.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Merciful God: On this weekend, when people celebrate those who have nurtured them, we give you thanks for all who have nurtured us in life and in faith: men or women, related by adoption, blood or marriage – or of no relationship at all – the teachers, coaches, caregivers, friends, counselors and healers who have brought us thus far doing your work for wholeness and health in the world. We remember too, all those who have gifts to give, but have not yet found their calling, the ones who ache for shelter, those who grieve wonderful relationships sundered by death and those who grieve relationships not to be. May each one of us continue to be nurtured and to nurture as the world has need and as we have capacity to give.

We pray in the name of the one who lived and died for the sake of the whole world with these words and the ones he taught us saying...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.**

Give us this day, our daily bread.

**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**