

Persistent Love

John 4:1-30

The goal of our series this fall is to take a fresh look at some familiar stories in the Gospels, to slow down a bit and ask a single, precise question: *how does Jesus love us?* We want to meditate on the heart of Christ revealed in the person of Christ this fall, to look at how his interactions with those he encountered during his earthly ministry reveal his love to us. To ‘see how he loved them,’ and so understand more deeply, and reflect more fully how he loves us.

So far we have looked at Christ’s *willing love* in Mark 1, how he was willing to move toward the leper who approached him, to rehumanize him, restore him, and redirect him from getting too excited about small things. Then we saw Jesus’ *heavenly love* in John 3, when Nicodemus approached him—a member of the religious elite who thought he had God’s kingdom figured out. Jesus, in his love, was unwilling to leave him trapped in his earthly categories, but exposed his real need for radical transformation, and ultimately met that need through his cross and resurrection.

In a similar way, in Mark 2, we saw Jesus’ *omniscient love* on display. How he is able to love the paralyzed man perfectly—addressing the deeper need for forgiveness, not just the one everyone else could see—because he knows us intimately and thoroughly. Then in Mark 4 we saw how Jesus loved his disciples in their unbelief—his *disruptive love*, which through the trial of the storm created space for them to realize who he truly is.

But each of the people we’ve met so far either knew Jesus (like his disciples), or knew of Jesus and sought him out (like the leper, or Nicodemus, or the paralyzed man and his friends). What happens when someone encounters Jesus who doesn’t know who he is, or isn’t looking for him? What does his love look like then? And what does that mean for us—whether we’re trying to reach out to or come alongside someone who doesn’t know who Jesus is, or see their need for him, who isn’t really looking for his love—or whether that’s us?

Our story this morning helps us answer that question as it shows us the persistent love of Jesus—how no social, personal, or religious barrier, and no evasive maneuver, can keep Jesus from revealing who he is and offering new life to all who believe.

So far in John’s Gospel, Jesus has been ministering in Jerusalem, cleansing the temple and conversing with Pharisees like Nicodemus in ch. 3, and his ministry is beginning to become rather well known. Enough that it’s now eclipsing John the Baptist’s ministry, much to the alarm of the Pharisees (3:22-36). But because Jesus’ hour had not yet come and the cross was still off in the distance, this flurry of attention tells Jesus that it’s time to leave Judea and head back to Galilee for a while. But to get to Galilee, you have to go through Samaria. That was the shortest

and most common route. And along that route, what begins as a rest stop at Jacob's well becomes another window into the heart of Jesus.

So Jesus is weary from his journey. He is thirsty. It's noon—the peak of the day's heat. And so while his disciples head into town to buy food, Jesus (though he doesn't have anything to draw water with), sits down at a well. And a woman from Samaria comes to draw water.

She's not looking for Jesus. She didn't hear a report that he was in the area and come search him out to be healed or to hear him teach. She's there for the same reason he's there—to get water. And when he speaks to her, she's actually quite suspicious. For real reasons.

First, he's Jewish and she's Samaritan. Look at her response to his request for a drink (v. 9): “How is it that you, *a Jew*, ask for a drink from me, a woman of *Samaria*?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans [or perhaps “do not use (dishes) that Samaritans have used].) To the typical first-century Jew, the Samaritans were tainted goods.

There's a back-story here. When the King of Assyria carried the ten northern tribes of Israel into captivity in 722 B.C., he repopulated those areas with foreigners. As those foreigners intermarried with the remaining poorer Jews in the region, their descendants came to be known as Samaritans. You can read about that 2 Kings 17. But when the southern tribes of Judah later returned from exile in Babylon, the Samaritans from the north never quite measured up. They were racially impure, and they had parted from the standards of Jewish religion. They worshiped God at their own temple on Mount Gerizim, instead of in Jerusalem. And they used an abridged Bible that contained only Genesis–Deuteronomy, instead of the entirety of what we call the Old Testament. And so to the Jews, they were outside of the covenant. Unclean. That's what made the parable of the Good Samaritan so radical in its day—the priest and the Levite, who were to be models of Jewish religion and morality, being shown up by a Samaritan. So why would this Jewish man ask a Samaritan for a drink? She's understandably suspicious.

But the ethnic difference isn't the only reason she's suspicious. Second, she's a woman alone with a man at a well. Notice in her response how she doesn't just emphasize the ethnic distinction, but the gender distinction also. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a *woman* of Samaria?” (Jn. 4:9). A woman finding herself alone with a strange man can be quite intimidating. And it's not just potentially threatening; it was socially out-of-bounds in that day, because it invited potential scandal. Jesus' own disciples “marveled that he was talking with a woman” when they got back (v. 27). Jesus broke the Mike Pence rule! What's he thinking?

But third, there's another element that likely feeds into the guardedness we see in the woman's response. She seems to be a bit of an outcast even among her own people. Why else would she come to collect water in the heat of the day, rather than the cool of the morning or evening, when everyone else was likely to be there? Jesus will put his finger directly on this later, but there seems to be an element of shame at play here. Something she feels she has to hide.

And so the woman is guarded. She's unaware of Jesus' identity, suspicious of his intentions, and ashamed of her own sin. She doesn't know who Jesus is, and isn't really interested whatever he's selling.

And that's the precise problem that Jesus sets out to overcome. Because he knows if she knew who he was, and what he offered, she'd want in. Look at v. 10: “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.”

But it’s not going to be an easy sale. There are multiple barriers standing between this woman and the life Jesus offers. More than that, as soon as he gets close, she goes into evasive maneuvers, dodging and distracting. Like those action movies, when one someone fires a heat-seeking missile at a jet, and it starts to do barrel rolls, or fire off flares to dodge or distract the missile.

But Jesus’ love is persistent. No barriers can hold back, and no evasive maneuvers can outsmart Jesus’ commitment to reveal who he is and offer new life to all who believe.

So what does that persistent love look like here?

First, it means *Jesus takes the initiative*, which we’ve already seen. He doesn’t sit around waiting for her to ask who he is or for what he can give her. She doesn’t know she needs what he has to offer. So Jesus takes the initiative. He starts the conversation. But he’s very gentle in doing so. It’s quite different than the way he spoke to Nicodemus in the previous chapter. There he was direct and blunt, because Nicodemus thought he had it figured out. He had to be roused from his presumption and redirected to the right conversation. The Samaritan woman doesn’t even know she needs to have a conversation. And so Jesus is gentle with her. He will challenge her, as we’ll see, but he’s very patient and gentle in getting there. He doesn’t treat her as an enemy to be defeated or proven wrong, he invites her into dialogue. He takes the first step.

And that’s something for us to think about in our own lives, both for receiving Jesus’ love, and for sharing it. In terms of receiving it, never forget that Jesus is the one who took the initiative with us. We don’t know him or love him because we figured him out. As 1 John 4:19 reminds us, “We love because he first loved us.” Or 1 John 4:10, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” The reality is that none of us know our need of Christ until he opens our eyes and hearts to draw us to himself. As Jesus says in John 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” God always takes the initiative. And so there ought to be both a profound humility and a profound joy and gratitude in our experience of Jesus’ love.

Moreover, when it comes to sharing the love of Christ with others, the reality is that sometimes we have to take the initiative too—just like Jesus. It’s always nice when someone comes to you asking about the hope you have in Christ. Perhaps they experience a crisis in their life that wakes them up to their need. But what about our friends and family, or colleagues and classmates, who don’t know that they need Jesus? They don’t realize their need. How long will we sit around by the water cooler before we initiate a spiritual conversation? Not a debate, but a dialogue. It can be scary to think about, but is Jesus not worth it? Is the love and new life he offers not compelling enough? Persistent love begins by taking initiative.

Second, after taking the initiative, Jesus persists in his love by *stirring up an unknown thirst in the woman’s heart*. In somewhat crass terms, he’s the consummate marketer. He creates in her a desire for something she didn’t even know she wanted. Though unlike much of what gets marketed today, she actually needs what he has to offer—it’s a matter of life and death.

Look again at v. 10:

Jesus 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.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (Jn. 4:10-14)

Oh to drink and never be thirsty again. The power of that metaphor is somewhat lost on us today in our age of modern plumbing, where we can just turn on the tap and get fresh water right in our homes. But for most of human history, where if you wanted fresh water in meant daily trips to the well (sometimes multiple trips), it’s a powerful picture. And one that captures the woman’s attention and imagination.

But of course Jesus is talking about satisfaction at a much deeper level. A satisfaction the woman can barely begin to imagine. He uses a play on words to describe it. “Living water” is moving water—fresh water that comes from a spring, rather than stale water sitting in a stagnant pond. But it’s also the language of new life by God’s Spirit used in the Old Testament, in passages like Ezekiel 36, Isaiah 44, and Jeremiah 2. Later in John chapter 7 Jesus says, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of *living water*’” (7:37-38). And then John explains for us in v. 39, “Now this he said *about the Spirit*, whom those who believed in him were to receive.”

This is the life Jesus wants to give the woman. This is the gift of God that he offers all of us—new and eternal life with God. A satisfaction utterly unparalleled on earth. Even if we aren’t really looking for it, once we glimpse it, or hear a rumor of it, we know we have to have it. It really is like seeing a commercial and walking away desperate for something you didn’t even know existed thirty seconds ago. I’ve lived my whole life up to this point content without that, but now that I know it exists, I can’t imagine life any other way.

But in this case, it’s true. There really is nothing else that will satisfy us like eternal life in Jesus. And it’s not just true for the woman, it’s true for us today, whether we’re talking about receiving Christ’s love or sharing that love for others.

Everyone thirsts. We all long for something outside of ourselves to fill us up. And most of us will spend our lives chasing that hunger, that thirst, looking for satisfaction. We might try to meet it with success, or achievement, or money, or possessions, or people, or sex, or drugs, or power, or fame. But every single one of those things will leave us thirsty, and every drink we take is less effective at satisfying our thirst than the one before.

Years ago, the great tennis champion Boris Becker said, “I had won Wimbledon twice, once as the youngest player. I was rich . . . I had all the material possessions I needed. . . . It is the

old song of movie stars and pop stars . . . They have everything, and yet they are so unhappy. . . . I had no inner peace.”¹

Jesus says, “whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (4:14). As we consider the invitation of Jesus, do we see how nothing this world offers can compare, and are we helping those around us see it—that what they’re really longing for, aching for, thirsting for (even if they don’t know it yet) is Jesus?

The woman wants in. She wants what Jesus is offering. But she’s still confused. She says to him in v. 15: “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.” She’s still thinking in earthly categories (much like Nicodemus in ch. 3, when Jesus told him he had to be born again and he’s thinking about entering a second time into his mother’s womb, cf. Jn. 3:5). She’s not there yet, and so Jesus, in his love, persists. He keeps pursuing.

He has taken the initiative, he has stirred up an unknown thirst in her heart; now, third, *he exposes her need for a Savior*. Look at how the conversation completely shifts in v. 16. She asks him for the water he’s offering, and then he says this: “Go, call your husband, and come here.”

Talk about an awkward change of subject. Especially when the woman answers in v. 17, “I have no husband,” and Jesus says, “I know.” “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true” (Jn. 4:17-18).

Ouch. Why does Jesus go there? That’s a pretty risky move. If you said something like that to a woman you just met in a coffee shop, you’d be wearing her mocha. So what is Jesus doing, having started so gently and now prying so personally?

He’s bringing her to the place where she can understand who he is and the gift he offers. And that means she has to come to grips with her real problem, and her real need—the problem of sin, and her need for a Savior. This isn’t about shaving a few steps off the Fitbit on her way to and from the well. This is about the eternal satisfaction of being reconciled with God and redeemed for his purposes—a redemption that requires the forgiveness of sins. If we don’t understand that we have a sin problem that needs to be forgiven, we aren’t in a place to receive the gift Jesus has to offer.

Sin is a tricky subject today. Sometimes it seems that churches or Christians talk too much about it. Like they’re plagued with chronic guilt or obsessed with evaluating everyone else’s morality. And that happens. But the other error is just as common, and more so in the world—to *not* talk about sin, or pretend that it isn’t a problem at all. Or that you can understand the love of Jesus without coming to grips with sin.

Sin matters not because God is grumpy, but because he’s *holy*. And our sin, our rebellion and disobedience, separates us from God. It destroys our connection, our relationship; it makes us enemies of God. And it destroys our relationships with others around us. You can’t love someone while ignoring sin. That would be like being nice to someone but not warning them that

¹ As cited in Timothy Keller, *Encounters with Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 28.

they're going the wrong way down a one-way street. And you can't understand the love of God for you without owning your sin, and what it cost God to deal with it mercifully. Again, listen to 1 John 4:10: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Christ's willingness to deal with our sin by giving his life on the cross is *the epitome* of love.

And so if we're going to understand God's love for us, or if we're going to share that love with others, we can't ignore the uncomfortable topic of sin. It's probably not the first thing you bring up in a conversation with someone you just met, who doesn't know who Jesus is or realize their need for him. But, if you never bring it up, you're not sharing the gospel. And that means you're not really loving them in an eternally-significant way. And it need not be an us-versus-them, because we're just as guilty of sin and just as in need of grace as anyone else. It's not us Christians here and those sinners over there; it's us sinners here, and our gracious Savior there, inviting all of us to find forgiveness in him.

So in his love, Jesus exposes the woman's sin. He reveals his divine knowledge of her personal story—not so he can publicly shame her, but so that he can completely remove her shame and cleanse her from the inside out. Which brings us to his final move in his persistent love: *he reveals himself as the Savior she needs*.

Her guard remains up. In fact, it seems to be a bit higher, as Jesus reveals his knowledge of her sin. And so she begins to pull some evasive maneuvers—dodging, redirecting. And the first flare she shoots off is the topic of religion.

Being a Samaritan was not only a matter of social and cultural identity, it is also a matter of religion. And the woman seems quite familiar with it, as she brings up one of the central points of contention between Jews and Samaritans—the proper place of worship. She says to Jesus in v. 19, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship" (4:19-20).

Now, while it's clearly an attempt to change the subject, it's an honest question. It has real world implications for how Jews and Samaritans relate to God. But, as Jesus gently points out, it's no longer the *right* question now that the Messiah is here. Verse 21:

Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'" (4:21-24)

While Jesus does correct her that the Jews do in fact have a historical and covenantal priority in God's plan of redemption ("salvation is from the Jews"—it's through Abraham's offspring that the Messiah will come), his main point is that *with the coming of the Messiah*, things are going to be different for both Jews and Samaritans, as well as the rest of the world. All of the outward expressions of Israel's faith—the temple, the sacrifices, the offices of prophet, priest, and king—all of them pointed forward to the arrival of the Israel's King, the Messiah or Christ. And so with his arrival, what was true of the temple is now true of Jesus—*he* is the special presence of God in

the world. “Destroy this temple,” says Jesus in John 2, “and in three days I will raise it up,” speaking of his body (Jn. 2:19). And when God pours out his Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost, they become the temple of God, now scattered throughout the earth.

So the woman’s question is a moot point. It no longer matters where the temple is located now that Jesus is here. What do you care about the shadow when the substance is standing right in front of you?

And yet, not recognizing Jesus for who he is, she remains unconvinced. And so, in a somewhat ironic twist, she fires off one more flare, attempting to end the conversation. Verse 25: “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” We don’t have to settle this today; when the Messiah gets here, he’ll tell us who’s right and who’s wrong.

And finally, Jesus’ persistence pays off. He reveals himself to be the Savior she needs. Verse 26: “I who speak to you am he.”

At this point in the conversation you might expect Jesus to do a mic drop, or something like that. But this isn’t about the petty triumph of winning an argument. It’s about the persistent love of pursuing a lost sheep in order to give them life. There is no barrier that Jesus is unwilling to break through to reveal himself and his love. There is no maneuver we can pull to outsmart him or shake him when he sets his sight on our hearts. He takes the initiative, he stirs up in us an unknown thirst, and he exposes our sin and our need for a Savior so that he can say to us, “I who you speak of am he.”

So are we willing to believe that? Do you believe that Christ, in his love for you, bridged the gap between heaven and earth, rent the heavens and came down as our Savior and King, not willing to let anything stop him from what he came to do—to give his life as a ransom for many, to buy us back out of our sin? Perhaps you don’t know who Jesus is or you’re not really looking for him. But just because you’re not looking for him, doesn’t mean he isn’t pursuing you. God brought you here this morning, didn’t he? Think through your life and how God is trying to get your attention. What is he saying to you about his love?

And are we willing to embody his persistent love as we share the love of Christ with others. Friends or family, colleagues or classmates who don’t even know they’re looking for Jesus. Or who perhaps have decided they don’t really want what Jesus is selling. What does it look like for us to embody his persistent love? Both his patience *and* his persistence, his gentleness *and* his directness? It takes a lot of prayer, a lot of wisdom, and a lot of support from one another. It takes a lot of faith—faith to step out in taking the initiative, to appeal to that thirst that nothing on earth can satisfy, to bring up the sin problem, and to point them to the Savior.

Many of you were here last spring when Christopher Yuan and his parents shared their story. How as Christopher ran further and further from God and from his parents, they never gave up. How his mom fasted and prayed for him every Monday for seven years, until Christopher found himself and the very bottom of society’s barrel, where he was finally able to hear Jesus calling him. No one is beyond the reach of Christ. Because no one is beyond the reach of his love.

And when we see and taste that persistent love, it changes everything. When the woman finally sees Jesus for who he is, and begins to understand just what it is he was offering to her, the same woman who had come to the well secretly, under the cover of the day's heat, now ran to town to give public testimony to Jesus. "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" (v. 29). Verse 39 tells us that "many Samaritans from that town believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony." And as Jesus spent time with them, many more believed because of his word (v. 41). Verse 42: "They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.'"

May we see and taste and embody the persistent love of Christ.