

Epiphany 4/RIC Sunday NL 2022
John 4: 1- 42
January 30, 2022

Reconciling in Christ Sunday is our chance to focus again on the commitment we express at the beginning of our bulletin: *The Good News of God's grace is for all, regardless of age, abilities, physical and mental health, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, education, income or strength of faith. There is nothing we do, have done or will do that can separate us from God. God makes no exceptions, nor do we. Come join us in praise, prayer and the work of our Lord!*

We've got a picture of that message on the cover of the bulletin. This year, Reconciling Works, the national organization that works for full inclusion and celebration of LGBTQIA people in the life of the ELCA, has partnered with youth leaders. What's come out of that partnership is this wonderful theme, *Made in God's Image: God's Boundless Diversity*. It's also the theme for this year's Youth Gathering—and, even though we didn't plan it that way, it's hard to think of a story in the Gospels that better proclaims this truth than the Samaritan Woman.

There is a lot of talk about diversity—and, the honest truth is that, as human beings, we struggle with our differences. So, it's a good and helpful thing to take a minute and take in what is being said in very few words: *Made in God's Image: God's Boundless Diversity*. All people are made in God's image—all people—all

people have that of God in them. Granted there is a lot of other stuff in us as well—but it doesn't obliterate the piece of God that is there.

It might be very hard to believe—especially about people who are hard for us to deal with. *It might also be hard to believe about ourselves.*

It's the word made flesh—God coming in the flesh—as a human being in Jesus. It's what we call the Incarnation. Surely, God became flesh uniquely in Jesus. But the Incarnation is happening in us as well.

The second part is also important—"God's diversity is boundless." The way God is incarnated is boundless. The diversity that we see in people is a reflection of God's diversity—and all this diversity is *not a problem*. *Boundless* is such a positive word. All these differences are gifts from God and reasons to celebrate.

It's also true that building relationships across differences is a lot of work. It takes intentionality and commitment—but the rewards are boundless—like Jesus shows us in this encounter with the Samaritan woman.

Debby Irving shares openly and insightfully about her efforts to build relationships across racial divides in her book, *Waking Up White: Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. She talks about having something she calls, "Courageous Conversations." These are conversations where the people involved take risks, where they push

beyond polite and comfortable topics to places where honest and important things can be talked about—where the truth of who we are and what really matters to us can be shared.

She writes: *Intimate human connection and enduring trust are the rewards of courageous conversation. The trick for me has been learning to stay in the conversation long enough to get to the other side, where niceness gives way to authenticity, understanding, and trust...*

Jesus and the Samaritan woman show us what a courageous conversation looks like.

First of all, it didn't just happen. Jesus went out of his way to *make* it happen. A map will show you that do not need to go through Samaria to get from Judea to Galilee. Most Jews would have avoided going to Samaria—but not Jesus. He intentionally goes there.

On so many levels, this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is unimaginable. In this time, it wasn't normal or polite for a man to speak to a woman he didn't know. And, an observant Jew would definitely *not* be asking a Samaritan woman for a drink no matter how thirsty he was because he would have to turn around and head back to the Temple in Jerusalem to be cleansed. But Jesus is not afraid to acknowledge and reveal his

need—he's a human being, walking in the desert, who needs a drink of water.

Both Jesus and the Samaritan woman hang in there with this courageous conversation. It's the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in any of the Gospels—and there's a lot to it.

I want to focus on one part of the conversation—the part where they talk about her marital history. She's had five husbands and she's now living with a man who is not her husband. The picture that's often painted of this woman is that she's wild—that she has a shameful past.

But the text doesn't tell us anything about *why* she's had so many husbands. It could be that she was divorced. In Jesus's day, she would have had no say in that because only males could initiate a divorce. Since there is no mention of children, it's likely she was not able to have children. That could be a reason for divorce.

It could be that she was widowed. There was a custom called Levirate marriage where the oldest brother of the man who died was obligated to marry the widow. Maybe they went through all the brothers and the last one refused to marry her. We *just* don't know.

What we *do* know is that she has had a tragic personal history and Jesus gives voice to it. He knows who she is—he knows the pain of her history. There is no judgment, no minimizing—just acceptance of the truth of her life.

It's something we all need—and something we can give.

And it leads to more profound connection.

After he shows that he knows the pain in her life, the Samaritan woman sees Jesus differently. She sees him as someone whom she can ask hard questions of and talk about what really matters. We hear her ask him a risky and courageous question. “Where the holiest place?” That doesn't sound like such a risky question but it's actually the main religious controversy between Jews and Samaritans. Jews say the place to worship is the Temple in Jerusalem and Samaritans say it's Mt. Gerizim.

The deep question behind this controversy is, “Where is God?” Is God only with the Jews? Or is God with us, too?

And Jesus says, “God is spirit.” The Spirit isn't tied to a particular location.

In her own way, the Samaritan woman recognizes that the Spirit is present in Jesus in a way that she has never encountered before—and she is transformed—so much so that she runs back to the village because she just has to tell other people about him—she wants them to experience the restoration—the new life--she has. It's worth noticing that she's not even 100% sure of who Jesus is but can't stop herself from telling everyone to “come and see a man who told me everything I've ever done!” As Fred Craddock says, her tentative words of witness are “not exactly a recitation of the Apostles' Creed.”

This story of the transforming encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman was an important one for the first people who heard it—for the people John was writing this Gospel for. They were a community that was struggling with being excluded. This was a time—after Jesus’s death—when the followers of Jesus, the first Christians, were Jews who were still part of the community who gathered at the synagogue. But tensions grew, and this particular group of Jewish Christians was kicked out of the synagogue—and they were hurting.

This community of Jewish Christians also included Samaritans who were drawn to following Jesus. It’s possible that this mixing with Samaritans was part of what got them kicked out of the synagogue.

So, this story of a marginalized Samaritan woman who is seen and loved and transformed by Jesus—and who then goes on to be the best sharer of the good news of Jesus in the entire Gospel—would have been such an encouraging one for this community.

Fast forward to today—and to all of the people who have felt excluded or cut off from the churches they grew up in or even from their own families because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Think especially of the young people who are struggling—Yes, things are better today but, in the last year, it’s still not been easy for LGBTQIA+ youth. 30 % say they were physically

threatened at school. 73 % report being verbally threatened. And, sadly, 43 % say their families make them feel bad about their orientation or identity.

How important this story of Jesus knowing the truth of who you are and not only loving and accepting you but calling you to be someone who shares that love and acceptance with others—how important this story is for young people—people of any age—who have been excluded or felt less than.

And how important this story is for us as an RIC community. It's a call to us to look at how we can be more active in our welcome—how we can be like the Samaritan woman—inviting others to “come and see”—to experience the love and acceptance that is here. It's also a call to be in courageous conversations with others who might never set foot in this sanctuary or join us online but who will meet Jesus in *us*—in the safe spaces we can be—in the love and acceptance we can give. Jesus is present in and through us—incarnated in us.

***We* are part of God's plan to love the whole world.**

Thanks be to God. Amen.