

April 28, 2024

Lesson 9: Samaritans Encounter the Messiah

Scripture: John 4:21-42

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Today we continue our unit titled “Empowering Spirit,” as we examine how Jesus and the Holy Spirit led people to focus on spreading the gospel to languages where others could understand the gift of faith and grace. Today’s lesson will be to explore what it means to call Jesus, as the Samaritan woman did, the “savior of the world.”

Today’s scripture lesson comes from the gospel of John. The text focuses on Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman and the whole chapter is dedicated to the exchange. Like his encounter with Nicodemus in chapter three, there are huge religious implications for Jesus’ exchange. In this case, Jesus’ conversation and words with the Samaritan woman will help reinterpret centuries of tension.

Jesus goes to a Samaritan territory where he could be considered an enemy, as the Samaritans and Jews, although related, have had numerous years of strife. The schism, per 2 Kings 17, occurs when the northerners were not carried off in exile, they allowed Alexander the Great to build them a temple on Gerizim.¹ When the Judean exiles returned under Ezra to rebuild, they could not stand the idea of any other shrine for the restored nation except the one they rebuilt in Jerusalem.² When the Samaritans were asked to tear down the structure, the answer was no and thus a long-standing tension was established between the two groups.

Jesus and the woman meet at a well associated with the biblical patriarch Jacob and thus they begin a conversation about living water and then name the politics of this exchange. Jesus is talking to a Samaritan woman, one who is a polygamist, ruffling the feathers of societal norms. Jesus does indeed bring up the conversation about where they worship as well as the nature of the woman’s personal life. When she begins to talk about the Messiah, Jesus names he is the one of whom she speaks. With an interlude with the disciples, the conversation ends and the woman goes to tell others about her encounter with the Messiah, “the one who told her everything she’s ever done.”³ Jesus then takes his disciples aside to talk about food and being fed, making a metaphor about the whole situation.

Jesus’ exchange is significant as his conversation with the Samaritan woman also acknowledges what Jesus knows about the Samaritans from a Jewish viewpoint. Jesus knows about their false worship, consorting with Judah’s enemies, and perhaps other sins; even still the

¹ Sloyan, Gerard. “John.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009.), 53.

² Ibid.

³ John 4:29.

Samaritans are presented as a people Jesus accepted.⁴ The gospel spreads and the Samaritans come into the fold as some believe he is indeed the Messiah, their Savior.

Application

The term “Savior” is perhaps the one I hear most often when people talk about Jesus. Most theology in the Christian American South is dominated by the important understanding of Jesus as our Savior. Whether it is the Baptist, Methodist, or Church of Christ denominations, you are most likely to hear people trying to articulate how Jesus had an individual encounter with them so they might feel the assurance of Jesus. We too have those stories depending on our tradition and we can speak in the Christian vernacular.

Yet what does it mean if we step back and think about Jesus as the Savior of the world? Indeed, it is significant and important for practicing Christians to acknowledge Jesus as our Savior, the one who came to save us amidst our individual sins. The gospel lesson today points though to how Jesus did not just come for individuals though; Jesus came for the entire world. For us, this means while “Jesus and me” is indeed paramount to our spiritual development, we are also called to reflect on what it means for how Jesus came to save the world.

This is perhaps where the source of so many conflicts in the Christian faith and life come. Often, I hear people do a wonderful job of describing how Jesus is their Savior. There is the articulation of how someone learned in confirmation and then they felt moved to join the church. Or maybe another person goes down a wayward path, perhaps with drugs and/or promiscuous sex, and they have a conversion experience where they are convicted of the Lord’s saving presence in their lives. They make a turn around with God’s grace and it is a beautiful thing for them and their loved ones. I love hearing both of those stories as it speaks to how God is always on the move in people’s lives, leading them to places of renewal and assurance.

As we cherish those individual experiences, I think the saving grace of Jesus though is to keep spurring us on from translation into transformation. If Jesus does indeed save us from ourselves, how might Jesus save others, perhaps in ways we do not understand or comprehend? The biggest danger for Christians who profess Jesus as Savior is how we sometimes think so much of our experience or what we know, we forget to listen to how others are transformed by God. Jesus, being the Savior of the world, means he is the one who has the power and ability to change the world. We are witnesses of these things and yet we are not the ones who hold a monopoly on how or who Jesus saves.

What we notice in this passage is Jesus does not really listen to the concerns of his disciples when they see him talking to this Samaritan woman. Instead, he begins to focus on their errand to getting food. The greater metaphor comes as he speaks of planting and harvesting. The disciples are reapers, who are not so much to look at others, as they are to work on their own relationship with God. It is there they will be blessed as they do kingdom work and leave God to the business of saving souls.

The same goes for the church today. When I hear of or see people focusing so much on the “sins” or “transgressions” of others with a veil of condemnation, I am always intrigued as to what those people think of their own sins. The reality is all of us have sins, both of commission or omission, and before we start wondering or even prophesizing about the condemnation of souls lost, we might want to work on our own salvation with fear and trembling. With Jesus as our Savior, we are called to reflect on our individual transgressions lest we think Jesus’ death on

⁴ Sloyan, “John,” 56.

the cross was for those “poor sinners” with our sins somehow being less than those of our neighbors.

The good news for all of us is how Jesus is the Savior of the world. This means we do not have to worry about others because it is in Jesus’ hands to save others. He is the one who came to save the world and he is the one who will stand the test of time. What he asks of us is what he asks of the disciples. We are to love others, preach the good news of Jesus Christ, and be a people of peace, love, and compassion. He will do the heavy lifting and he will be the one to transform and heal the world with his saving grace.

What is your experience with Jesus as Savior? Why do you think the term Savior is so important on an individual basis? How can you hold yourself accountable when you start dwelling more on the sins of others? Who are people who have helped grow in understanding God’s grace? How is Jesus calling you to be a disciple today?

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