

**My Neighbor
(We know for ourselves)**

**Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Roxanne Jones Booth
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
July 26, 2020**

Scripture: John 4:39-42

Good morning Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church! To all of you who have joined in on this blessed Lord's Day, I greet you all in the wonderful name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

I also bring you greetings from the Riverview Missionary Baptist Church in Coeymans, NY where I serve alongside my husband, the Reverend Antonio Booth as co-pastor.

I'd like to thank you for inviting me back this summer. It was a pleasure driving out to your beautiful church building last summer and I am grateful and honored that you invited me back virtually this year.

This morning we will turn our attention the Gospel of John 4:39-42. Here we break in on Jesus doing what Jesus did, and continues to do through us and that is to share the good news of the love of God to those who do not know that life can be so good.

The Scripture reads: (NIV) "Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did.'" So, when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of His words many more believed. They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world." Our topic this morning is simply, "My Neighbor".

I am not sure when you chose the topic, "Who is my neighbor" for your summer's preaching series, but I can say there is no more relevant topic for discussion given our current social environment.

When the entire world witnessed the death of George Floyd on video on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the conscience of the world was awakened again to ever persistent and pervasive systemic racism that has been a part of the fabric of the United States since before the Revolutionary War.

Without taking too much time going into our history in these United States, it is an historical fact that people of African descent were not included in the celebrated language of “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.” African people who had been in the colonies since 1619 were not the subject of the words that proclaim, “ We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

When this declaration was written, Africans had been enslaved in the Americas for nearly 100 years. Taken from Africa at no request of their own, African people in these United States were merely property—chattel. Just like owning a cow, a chicken or even a five-pound bag of sugar, my ancestors were considered inhuman and subhuman.

For nearly 500 years the shadow of this racist understanding has shaped every thing that this nation has established. Every system set up to govern these United States has been infected with ways of thinking that harbor the notion that being White is superior to being Black. Systematically, racism has been ingrained into the social, political, economic and even religious structures in the United States.

As a result of the coronavirus, we are more aware of health, employment and housing disparities that have existed in the United States among Black and Brown people because of systemic racist practices in healthcare, housing and hiring. Black and Brown people are the majority of people who are essential workers and are falling ill because they are the majority working in food preparation and delivery; cleaning and disinfecting clinics, hospitals and nursing homes. They are the majority of people driving buses, Uber and Lyft.

A large proportion of Black and Brown people have underlining immuno-deficiency conditions due to inadequate access to affordable healthcare because of low-paying jobs and being denied promotion and advancement because of the color of our skin.

For Black and Brown people in the United States, these hardships are not new. We have lived with them all our lives. People ask me now; “When will this end?” They ask me, “How do you not lose hope?” Repeatedly my response has been, it’s not over until God says it’s over and until then I will continue to fight on until justice rolls on like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The fight for justice and equity has been the cry of African people from the beginning of our forced presence in the Americas and from generation to generation we continue to lift up the blood-stained banner. Congressman John Lewis, the greatest freedom fighter of my lifetime, has cemented in my mind that we as a people must continue to fight for freedom and participate in “good trouble, necessary trouble” until America lives up to its promise.

I have been raised on hope and I believe the words of the Christian hymn that says, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness”. When the law of the land in the United States was “separate but equal,” White people were comfortable in their churches, schools, libraries and other public buildings, not being concerned that Black people established these very same institutions for themselves or that separate institutions were set up for Black people by states and the federal government.

The so-called “Black church” exists today because of segregation and the legendary Jim Crow Laws of “separate but equal” that are an example of systemic racism. And yet, I still sing, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust a sweeter frame but holy lean on Jesus’ name” because the Bible teaches me that Jesus loves everybody and most of all Jesus loves the oppressed.

While this nation supported and implemented the standard of separate but equal, my ancestors understood that there was something more in the Bible than what they were being told.

They understood the message of Jesus as their message. They understood the story of Jesus’ journey on this earth as their story. They recognized the suffering of Jesus as what their life was and also what their life would be if they hold on to the message of hope and liberty in Jesus Christ. And they died believing Galatians 5:1, that it is for freedom that Christ has set them free and they would not be entangled again by the yoke of bondage.

And so, this is why I find a word about “My Neighbor” in our Scripture text this morning. My neighbor is set free and she in turn liberates her entire community. In our text we break in on the wonderfully refreshing encounter Jesus has with a despised, disliked, rejected and talked about person in the Bible. In the Bible, the rejected people are the ones other people love to hate. The rejected people in the Bible are talked about and lifted up as the most awful human beings in the world.

The religious leadership in Jesus’ time thought of women, tax collectors and sinners as the scum of the earth. Religious leaders in Jesus’ time were all men and these men even prayed prayers praising God for not making them woman. They would pray, “God, who has not made me a woman.” But Jesus teaches us by word and deed that his ministry is to the rejected, neglected persecuted and oppressed. He declared in Luke 4: 18-19, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And so, in our text this morning we find Jesus, the Savior of the world, intentionally speaking to a rejected person, speaking to a spiritually poor, spiritually blind and physically oppressed woman letting her know God is on your side.

As the background to our Scripture indicates, Jesus deliberately goes out of his way to meet with a person that upstanding people would never stop to talk to.

This encounter begins in John 4, verse 1 when Jesus is aware that the religious folk where he is are hating on him because they are jealous that Jesus is gaining and baptizing more disciples than another person they were hating on. John 4:1 says, "The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples." Verse 2 goes on to say that "When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee."

For all intents and purposes, it would seem that Jesus was avoiding the Pharisees' misguided feelings. The Scripture says that when he heard what his critics, the Pharisees, his haters, were saying, he left, he walked away.

I love that about Jesus. His examples are not complicated. In fact, his examples follow who he is and what he represents. His example follows the word of God. In Proverbs 26:4 it says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself." In other words, don't respond to a foolish person or you will be just like them.

So, Jesus did not respond to his haters, he simply walked away. And in his walking away he created the opportunity to be a blessing to someone that did not even know that they were even on Jesus' mind.

I say this because the Scripture goes on to say that Jesus just had to go through Samaria when he left Judea to go to Galilee. There were other ways Jesus could have gone from Judea to Galilee, but he was intent on going through Samaria.

We have learned in Bible study that the Jews and the Samaritans were hostile towards each other. In fact, Jews that needed to make the trip from Judea, situated in the south of Palestine, to Galilee, which is in the north, always went the long way around so they didn't have to meet any Samaritans by going through Samaritan territory.

There were some long-time existing differences that set the Jews against the Samaritans and neither side had attempted to reconcile. It is similar to there being some long-time existing

differences that set White people against Black people and today we have been made aware that we are in need of reconciliation, and thank God for Jesus.

Jesus knew of the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, yet and still, he just had to go from Judea to Galilee through Samaritan territory where he knew people hated him just because of his ethnic origin.

The great example I see here is that Jesus knew that the people of Samaria hated him because he was Jew, but Jesus didn't hate the Samaritans.

So, after leaving the haters in one place, Jesus intentionally goes to a territory of sure enough haters and he openly has a conversation with a person that no one would talk to. He has a life altering encounter with a woman that has a reputation of selling her body for profit. In those days, she was considered the worst of the worst.

We all know the story in verses 5-26 of John 4. Jesus gets to the town of Sychar in Samaria, he stops at a well and there at this well he meets a woman who has come to draw water from the well at noontime.

Mentioning that it is noon when Jesus meets this woman at the well is significant because it speaks to the shame this woman internalized about herself. She is there at noon drawing water because she knew at noon no one else would be there to draw water. I witnessed this while living in Africa; people go to get water from the public tap or the river either in the early morning and in the late afternoon. In the middle of day people are too busy working or about their daily routine to get water from the public water supply.

Reading further in the Scripture we understand better why this woman is at the well at noon. This woman who Jesus meets goes to the well at noon so that she will be the only one at the well at noon and therefore she would not have to hear other people's cruel remarks about her lifestyle or see other people look down their noses at her because of what she did for a living.

However, this day at noon, Jesus is at the well. This time at the well when no one else is expected to be around, Jesus is there. And at the well when this woman meets Jesus, Jesus welcomes her and invites her to think about living a better way. Jesus invites her to learn of him and drink of the real living water of knowing him as Lord and Savior.

After the conversation Jesus has with the woman, the Bible says in John 4:28-29 the woman left her pot at the well and went running to town telling people, "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" And because of this woman's enthusiasm, because of this woman's genuine belief in the message of Jesus, the Scripture goes to say in

verse 30, "They [the people] came out of the town and made their way towards him [meaning Jesus].

Now what excites me about this encounter is that it is because of this woman's testimony, the woman who has the reputation of being a husband stealer, it is because of this woman's testimony, the woman who has lived with five men and had slept with many besides those, it is because of this woman's testimony, the people in town who knew who she was and how she lived her life, left what they were doing to make their way toward Jesus.

These people knew this woman, they lived with her in community, they were her neighbors, the people who lived next to her and watched her going and coming and told other neighbors about her late-night visits with this man and that man.

Somehow these townspeople, this woman's neighbors, were willing to listen to her recollection of the encounter she had with a man who knew everything about her because they could see that something was changed about her. And because of her uncontrollable need to share the good news of her new life because of meeting Jesus, the Bible stays in John 4: 39, "Many of the Samaritans from the town believed in him because of the woman's testimony."

It did not matter that Jesus was not of the same ethnic background as they. It did not matter that they had a long history of hostility toward each other, it did not matter that their neighbor was thought of as being the lowest of the low, and in fact the scum of the earth, the Samaritans who had a history of hostility with the Jews responded to the fact that the encounter this woman had with Jesus was so transforming and it filled her with such passion that they could see a change had taken place in her life and they wanted what she had found.

This woman's testimony, her witness, her telling her story to others of what she had seen, heard and experienced with Jesus, moved, touched and inspired the townspeople so that they had to meet Jesus for themselves.

The Samaritans put aside their hostility, they put aside their bias and prejudice and wanted to know Jesus for themselves. This woman who was their neighbor, someone they did not think highly of, someone that they looked down on and treated as an outcast was changed. There was something about her that was different from what they knew about her. The neighbors who saw her every day and watched her and noticed her every move recognized that something was different about how this woman behaved after her encounter with Jesus.

I imagine she told her neighbors from the town that this Jewish man did not dismiss her presence when she approached the well to draw water, he did not move away from her to the other side of the well or even tell her she should let him drink first. This man simply asked her

for her assistance. He asked her, an enemy to Jews, for water from the well. This man never stopped speaking to her although she was a Samaritan and he was a Jew.

Jesus welcomed her, Jesus accepted her and Jesus acknowledged her as a person. He spoke with her and gave her answers to her questions about her faith that she said in John 4:25 that only the Messiah would explain when he came. And when Jesus said to her, in John 4:26, "I, the one speaking to you, I am he", the Scripture says the woman left her water jar and went back to town to tell her neighbors all about this man.

I imagine when her neighbors saw this woman after her conversation with Jesus, she looked like she never looked before. It was like she had a complete makeover. She acted different, holding her head up and walking and maybe running in the streets drawing attention to herself, no longer ashamed by what people thought of her or said about her.

The words Jesus shared with her had freed her from the fear of what people could do. She had met and had been embraced by the love of God and nothing else mattered.

She was free, free to be the woman God created her to be. No longer would she sneak about town avoiding contact with her neighbors because she was ashamed of her lifestyle. She had a new life. A life that would be lived according to the love of God that said she was made in the image of God and created to do good works, which God prepared in advance for her to do.

The Scripture says in John 4:42, that after her neighbors heard Jesus for themselves, they told this woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said, now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

After all the scorn, disdain and contempt, these neighbors came to see each other through new eyes because of Jesus.

Jesus makes the difference. In a world that is riddled with fear, uncertainty, racism, inequity, inequality, disparities and injustice, Jesus makes the difference.

When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace; in every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil

His oath, his covenant, his blood, support me in the whelming flood; when all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.

When he shall come with trumpet sound, oh, may I then in him be found; dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.