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First Presbyterian Church  
March 8, 2026  
Lent 3  
John 4: 5-42

**“When good news is also challenging news”**

Open with the story of Art and hospice and grace.

Sometimes grace shows up when we least expect it—when we are tired, when life has worn us down, when we think we already know how things are going to end. And suddenly there it is: undeserved kindness, unexpected mercy, a moment that reminds us that love is still at work in the world.

That’s the kind of moment we see in today’s story from John’s Gospel. When we meet Jesus, he’s traveling. Just before this, he was in Judea. But the Pharisees had begun to complain about him—about how many people were coming to him, about how freely he seemed to welcome people into God’s embrace. They were already uneasy about how far Jesus seemed willing to extend God’s grace.

So Jesus leaves Judea and heads toward Galilee. And the Gospel tells us something that sounds small but isn’t: *he had to go through Samaria*.

Most Jews didn’t go through Samaria. They went around it. Samaritans and Jews had distrusted one another for centuries. The divisions were religious, cultural, political—deep and old. But Jesus goes straight through.

By noon he’s tired from traveling, and he sits down beside a well. The disciples go into town to buy food.

Then a woman arrives at the well to get water, which is unusual for this time of day. Most women get water early, when it's cool and they can catch up with other women. He asks her for a drink, which catches her off guard because, as I said, Jews and Samaritans despise one another to the point of not speaking to one another. But Jesus dares to speak to her, which is disarming to her. She knows the enmity between their two cultures; furthermore, she knows it's not proper, not proper at all, for a man to speak to a woman in public. She challenges his presumptuousness, but at the same time understands from him that he may have something she needs. The living water Jesus speaks of sounds awfully good to her, especially if it means she won't have to come back to the well ever again. "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water," she says to him.

The conversation takes a decisive turn here; Jesus tells her to go get her husband. "I'm not married," she says. "That's correct," replies Jesus. "But you have had 5 husbands," which is two over the legal limit. "And the man you're with now is not your husband."

Now, let's pause here before we go any further, because for hundreds of years Biblical scholars have been fascinated with this woman. John Calvin, in his commentary on this text, essentially blames her for her divorces. Obviously, pronounced Calvin, she was a disagreeable and disobedient wife. (see John Buchanan, *"Conversation at a Well: Salvation Sandwiches"*).

Fred Craddock says:

*Evangelists aplenty have assumed that the brighter her nails, the darker her mascara and the shorter her skirt, the greater the testimony to the power of the converting word. Moralizers, however, have painted her as dangerous: beware her seductive ways, her mincing walk, her eyes waiting in ambush.*

But the truth is, the Bible doesn't say anything about any sin she has committed. We don't know why she's been married five times. She could have been left a widow five times, or she could have been divorced five times. Back then a husband could have left her for dropping a casserole dish (Karoline Lewis, [www.workingpreacher.com](http://www.workingpreacher.com)). The only thing we know

about her history is that it is tragic (Frances Taylor Gench). And she is an outsider because of the sadness in her life.

Jesus brings up her marital status to move the conversation to a new level of understanding, and he succeeds, because now she sees him as a prophet. So she presses forward, moving to that new level of understanding, and asks him about the mountain on which they are standing. It's Mount Gerazim, which for Samaritans was the holy dwelling place of God. But for Jews, God resides in Jerusalem. "Which is it?" she asks Jesus. This is another way of asking him, "Where is God?"

It is here that we touch on the most pressing theological question that separates Jews from Samaritans and will separate Jesus' followers from either group, because in reply to the woman's questions, "Where is God?" Jesus says, right here, speaking to you. "I am," he says, "the very presence of God."

It's the first time he says that to anyone. He hasn't even told the disciples that. But here he is, telling this Samaritan woman that he is God, which isn't an accident. Trust me, it's purposeful. John's Gospel doesn't do anything by accident; it's all intentional.

John wants us to know that Jesus will cross any boundary to get to us, and when he finds us he won't judge us, or condemn us, or criticize us, he'll accept us as a precious child of God, worthy of God's attention and focus. Here I am, Jesus says, like a cold glass of water on a hot summer day that quenches your thirst, loving you and accepting you for who you are, flaws and all. We call this grace, and it is amazing.

In her book "Travelling Mercies," Anne Lamott shares her journey of faith. She found herself broke, drunk, bulimic, depressed and addicted to drugs. She said, "I could no longer imagine how God could love me." Desperate, Anne set an appointment with an Episcopal priest.

She told him, "I'm so messed up that I don't think God can love me."

The priest replied, "God has to love you. That's God's job."

Anne's priest was right. God works full-time offering unconditional love to everyone. We call this grace, and it is amazing.

When the woman discovers who Jesus is, she drops her water jugs right there at the well and runs off to tell her friends and neighbors about Jesus. I think dropping the water jugs is symbolic. Because we all have heavy jars that we lug, day after day in the hot sun. Our jars are the "should haves," "ought tos," and "never wills" of our lives. They are the times we let the people we love down, the times we let ourselves down, and the times we let God down. They are the parts we keep hidden—our insecurities, our apathy, and our fears.

We lug these jars around, hoping to find a few drops of water in the well. We search endlessly for water, trying to find spiritual fulfillment. Like the woman at the well, we ask "Where can find this water? How much does it cost? What do I need to do?"

The answer, of course, is that you don't get it at all. It gets you. It comes unexpectedly, as you sit by a well doing the familiar and someone speaks in a way that catches you off guard. It comes as a gift. Like the best gifts of all, it comes without earning, the abundant expression of affection that flows from the heart of the giver. We call this grace, and it is amazing.

A few years, we took our four children to Chicago for a short trip while they were on Spring Break. It was one of the few times we've ever gone anywhere for Spring Break, and we made the most of it by going to Shedd Aquarium and to the top of the Sears Tower. But one thing I especially wanted to do was take the girls to American Girl Place. So off the girls and I went for lunch at American Girl while Terry took the boys to the Lego store.

I remember it like it was yesterday. The girls thought it was very fancy. The waiter brought seats for their dolls and teacups, too. They ordered fancy milkshakes, I ordered a glass of champagne, and when our drinks came we drank a toast to the special day. As we did, I was overcome with emotion. Memories of my Dad taking my sister and I Christmas shopping and to lunch at the old downtown May Company store in Akron came flooding

back to me, as did trips we took with my Mom to New York City. I was overwhelmed at the thought of their generosity and their love, of which I did nothing to deserve and at times, probably didn't deserve. As the girls and I clinked glasses, my only thought and hope was that I could be as generous with my children, and it was beginning there, in that store, as those memories came back to me.

The girls each got a doll, and Charlotte even got a stroller to go with hers. She pushed it all through the store and all through the hotel and to the hotel's pool and back and on the "alligator", her name for the elevators and escalators.

We went out to dinner that night, and when we got back to the room and opened the door, there was her stroller, waiting for her. "It's still here," she cried.

Friends, that is what grace is. It comes as a gift and it is always there waiting for us.

Please know that where ever you are, whoever you are, and whatever you are doing, God will cross borders to get to you because God loves you and accepts you just for who you are.

As the beautiful hymns says:

My song is love unknown

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul*

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul!*

*What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss*

*To bear the heavy cross for my soul, for my soul*

What wondrous love is this? Here's good news: We call it grace, and it is . . .amazing.

Amen.

