

Third Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2020
Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross
Dunn Loring, VA
Wade P. Hinkle

John 4:5-42

Worship in Spirit and Truth

Good Morning. Welcome to Holy Cross' video streamed March 15 service.

If you are not a parishioner and are wondering what this video feed is about, all Episcopal churches in the Washington DC area are closed for two weeks because of the corona virus. So, we are streaming this service for our parishioners. But if that's not you, maybe this is an opportunity to learn a bit more about how Episcopalians worship.

And one thing you may notice right away is that while we Episcopalians have talented and devoted ordained clergy, we also have a strong tradition of liturgical participation by laypeople. Which is why I am preaching today, even though I am not ordained clergy. So, if you are a newcomer, good morning. My name is Wade Hinkle, and I am a parishioner at Holy Cross.

So, to say the least, this week did not go as planned for me. And I bet that was true for you too. This is not the sermon I had ready at the beginning of the week. And I am delivering it today in a church with empty pews. Pews that will remain empty for at least two weeks.

It has been a frantic and frightening week for all of us. Schools and churches have shut. Travel bans have begun to close us off from the world. Financial markets are fluctuating wildly. People have been quarantined. People have fallen ill. Some have died.

And I think all of us, understandably, are nervous and apprehensive about what may lie ahead.

So it seemed only logical to rework the sermon to allow all of us to reflect for a few minutes on what is happening. I got started by re-reading today's Gospel passage from that perspective.

And what jumped out at me is verse 24. "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."¹

Let me explain why I think that thought is so relevant to us now.

To begin, a little context from the passage as a whole. Some have described it as the most famous "teaching moment" in Jesus' ministry. And what a teaching moment it was.

First of all, Jesus was traveling with his disciples in Samaria. So he was in a tough neighborhood to begin with. The Samaritans had a bad reputation with Jews. (One scholar has called Samaritans the "black sheep" of the descendants of Abraham.)² They were the left-behinds during the Exile. They intermarried with foreigners, built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, and re-wrote the Torah. Jews and Samaritans hated each other.³ As the Gospel passage notes, dryly, "Jews [did] not share things in common with Samaritans."⁴

¹ John 4:24

² Roger Hamed, "Interrupting Jesus: John 4 -- Samaritans & family black sheep," August 2015, accessed at <https://talkofjesus.com/samaritans/>.

³ John Piper, "God Seeks People to Worship Him in Spirit and Truth," March 1984, accessed at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-seeks-people-to-worship-him-in-spirit-and-truth>.

⁴ John 4:9.

And if that wasn't bad enough, in this passage, Jesus has managed to find someone whose life is so broken that she is rejected by the rejected. Her life is a shambles, a succession of failed relationships. She is deeply alienated from everyone.

Yet, in their brief encounter, Jesus not only sees her brokenness, he cures it! Cures it by opening her heart as he shares with her two life-changing *truths*: first, the power of God's love, and, second, Jesus' identity as Messiah.

And these truths were so profound that she was moved to share them with her neighbors, the people who were the *very source* of her despair and alienation. And the power of these truths spoke to the neighbors as well and opened *their* hearts in turn. As we read in the final verse, they told 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 truly the Savior of the world."⁵

All of this is summed up in verse 24. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

And once we understand this point, our eyes are opened to the fact that the *power* of God's truth is attested to throughout scripture. In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." In James 1:18, we are reminded that God "gave birth to us through the word of truth."

And what about the idea of spirit? It also appears throughout the New Testament. Take as an example First Corinthians chapter 3: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"⁶ Similarly, we find earlier in John in chapter 3 the understanding that "what is born of the Spirit *is* spirit."⁷

And a final understanding we can reach about John chapter 4 verse 24 is that *worship—worship* — is the key to allowing God's truth and spirit to work within ourselves. As scholar John Piper has written, "True worship comes only from spirits made alive and sensitive by the quickening of the Spirit of God."⁸ Worship, then, opens *our spirits to God's spirit*, and through that connection, we experience the truth of God's love of all of us.

So, that's my take on John chapter 4 generally.

But I promised at the start to offer some thoughts about how the passage, and particularly verse 24, can help us cope with the coming weeks.

First thought is to remind ourselves that *worship is important*, and it is especially important in times like these. And while it is true that Christ's teachings instruct us about the importance to Christians of living in community, today's Gospel readings also remind us that community has a dimension beyond the physical. Community and worship also have a spiritual dimension, and nothing that has happened this week takes that from us. Indeed, worship in spirit is linking us together this very Sunday. With, yes, a little help from technology.

And the second thought is to remind ourselves repeatedly how *powerful* the *truth* of God's love for us really is. That truth lifted the Samaritan woman from the depths of despair. It transformed her entire community. And it can do the same for us now. Things will *never* be so bad that this truth is not available to us. That truth is present with us today in this virtual worship service. And it will be by the side of each of us in the coming weeks. Jesus promised this, in today's reading.

⁵ John 4:42.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:16.

⁷ John 3:6. Emphasis added.

⁸ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Crown Publishing Group, 1986), p. 82.

I know all of us spent time this week preparing ourselves and our families physically to cope with the crisis. We've stockpiled sanitizer, figured out how to work from home, learned about "social distancing", and figured out how to cope with school closings and the like. I invite you to spend a little time today preparing yourself spiritually. Just maybe, today's Gospel reading can help.

Amen.