"We Worship Together" John 4:19-26 and Hebrews 10:19-27

When I was a boy, my family attended Oak Grove United Presbyterian Church about two miles from our home. We never missed a Sunday, unless someone in the family was quite sick. In a very real sense, it was our home away from home. **I can remember three pastors from my childhood:** Reverend Williams, Reverend Petticord, and Reverend Reynolds, who I'm sure had first names, **but I would never dare to call them by their first name.** All three of them would frequently begin worship with an opening sentence from the green *Hymnal* published by the Presbyterian Board of Education in Philadelphia: *"The hour cometh and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."*

Those lines are indelibly imprinted on my mind when I think about the church where I grew up, and they are, in case you've never heard them, a direct quote (*King James Version* of course) from an extended conversation Jesus has with a woman of Samaria that he meets at Jacob's well. The scene in John 4 of Jesus meeting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well is something like a century old bestselling novel by Warwick Deeping, titled *Sorrell and Son*. The book is about a decorated World War I veteran named Stephen Sorrell who is left to raise his young son, Kit, after his wife leaves their household. When a promising management opportunity falls through after his employer dies, Stephen humbles himself and takes a demanding job as a hotel porter to financially support his son's upbringing and his elite education. He endures heavy physical labor and social snobbery while hiding the menial nature of his work from his son's private school classmates, eventually enabling Kit to grow up to attend Cambridge University and train as a doctor. In the book there's a conversation between Sorrell and his son where the boy shares what his life is like. He says to his father, "It's like groping in an enchanted fog. The fog breaks for a moment; you see the moon or a girl's face; you think you want the moon or the face; and then the fog comes down again; and leaves you groping for something you don't quite know what."

In a sense the woman Jesus meets at the well has a vague discontent, groping for something she doesn't quite know what. Augustine talks about this, saying, *"our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."* Part of the human situation is that we cannot find happiness in the things that the human situation has to offer. Our unsatisfied longing, our vague discontent, something lacking is usually what drives us to know God and thereafter to worship God.

You see, in John 4 Jesus is not confronting the Samaritan woman's **adultery**. He's confronting her and the Samaritans' **idolatry**. He's not asking her, "Who have you been sleeping with?" but rather, "To whom do you give your highest allegiance?" So, the woman says in verse 20, *"Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."* Then Jesus says, *"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth."* **But the woman still didn't get it.** She remains focused on **where the right place is** for a Samaritan like her to worship. Yet Jesus shows her that **the place we worship** is not nearly as important as **who we worship**. The woman is focused on her discontent, whereas Jesus is showing her the way to find true contentment.

If I had to guess, I'd say the Samaritan woman had in her mind that she was a sinner before God and that she must give to God an offering for her sinfulness. She must take her offering to the House of God to put herself right with God. **Where is she supposed to take her offering?** To Mount Zion or to Mount Gerizim? But more to the point, she may not be worrying so much about where to take her offering, as she is rather asking a far more basic question: *"Where can I find God?"* Jesus' answer to the woman was that she did not need to go anywhere special to find God, neither Mount Gerizim nor Mount Zion. She did not need to offer a special sacrifice in a special place. True worship—in spirit and in truth—finds God wherever we are. We would also do well to recognize that false worship is selective worship.

The Samaritans took as much of Scripture as they wished and paid no attention to the rest. One of the most dangerous things in the world is an unbalanced

religion. It's easy to hold onto only the parts of God's truth that suit our personal views and disregard the things that conflict with our views. In the 20th century there were Christian thinkers and politicians who justified apartheid and racial segregation by appealing to certain passages of Scripture. Problem is they were forgetting great swaths of Scripture that proclaim we are all sinners who stand before God in need of his forgiveness—equally. Although none of us will ever grasp the whole truth of the gospel, it is total truth that we should aim for, not selecting fragments of truth that happen to suit our preconceived ideas.

Did the Jews and Samaritans ever reconcile their differences? Did they ever get back together? **The answer is yes, but it took a while.** First, Jesus crucifixion and resurrection. Then came the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The church grew by leaps and bounds. Jews began persecuting Christians for their faith, so they scattered to the four winds. Philip, *"a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,"* one of the first deacons, went to Samaria to preach the gospel. Whether his preaching was something they'd never heard before or a reminder of their common ancestry, he and the Samaritans drank from the same cup and embraced Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

Have I mentioned that this story is about reconciliation? Whether it's a matter of conflict in our homes, churches, communities, nations or the world, we're called to be reconciled to God and each other, **and there's only one way that's possible**. It's in Christ Jesus the Savior of the world. We can strive to reconcile our differences on a human level, looking for areas of agreement; and, if we work hard enough, we may even get close. But we'll never truly be at one with others until we are one in Christ. Only as we come together as sinners, redeemed and forgiven through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, can we be united in lasting relationships of peace, joy and love—reconciled to God and with one another.

And if we want to rediscover, why God wants us to make **gathering with other believers for worship and committing ourselves to the church a priority,** the book of Hebrews is a very good place to look. Neither the author

nor the audience of the book of Hebrews is specifically named, but the book itself reveals its nature and purpose. Like the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, verses 24 & 25 of Hebrews 10 strongly urges us to worship together: *"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting* ***together****, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."* **Teachings like this show us how to *rediscover* that the church is the place God has called us to gather, to grow, to serve and to love.** One of the things that makes coming to worship so meaningful is the fact that we are **together** in one place, physically here. You've heard me repeat the word **together** on Sunday mornings because we see, we feel, we experience God's presence here.

At the same time I'm so thankful that we can watch a service on YouTube when we're bodily removed from this place. But when we gather for worship, God meets us here and surrounds us here. We gather here to experience not only God's presence, but the presence of one another. Let's be clear: Attending worship does not make us a Christian. **But attending worship demonstrates that the Spirit of Jesus is alive in us because we desire to be with Jesus' people.** Every time we worship together, we *"spur one another on to love and good deeds."* We support one another! We love one another!

But notice a warning from the author of Hebrews: If we go on sinning by **not** doing these things, including **not** worshiping together, we should expect God's judgment. *Goodness gracious!* I get the feeling that God takes this seriously. What happens when we miss regular worship in the community of faith? For starters *"no sacrifice for sin is left"* (v. 26). Not only that, but we also think less about our brothers and sisters in the fellowship of faith. They don't come to mind as often. We don't have a quick conversation with them that leads to a longer conversation over breakfast or lunch. Beyond that we remove ourselves from the stream of encouragement, accountability, and Christian love. Attending worship does *not* make us a Christian! **But attending worship demonstrates that the Spirit of Jesus is alive in us because we desire to be with Jesus' people.** Don't know about you, but that's why I'm here. Amen.