

“On the Fringes”  
John 4:3-29  
World Communion Sunday

October 4, 2020  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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John Buchanan was the pastor for many, many years at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. During his final sermon, before he retired, he wore a cross around his neck.

It’s a cross that was given to him when he served as the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church General Assembly in 1996-97. It’s a cross that every moderator of our denomination’s General Assembly wears.

In fact, it is not one cross.  
It is three crosses held together.  
Where did these crosses come from?

According to Dr. Buchanan, the story goes like this.

After Pearl Harbor, you will recall that Japanese-Americans found themselves in a difficult situation, objects of suspicion and outright hatred.

During this time, a Japanese-Christian congregation in Chicago had its lease cancelled in the building it was occupying. They wrote a letter to the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, who at that time was the Rev. Harrison Ray Anderson.

They asked the Rev. Anderson for space to hold worship services.

Now the Rev. Anderson was a World War I veteran and staunch patriot. And he never hesitated in his response. He convinced the Session of Fourth Presbyterian that the faithful thing to do was to open the church doors and invite these fellow Christians in.

And so it happened.

Of course, there was opposition and anger among some at the church for sheltering these Japanese-Americans. And when there were threats to these newcomers who were making their home at Fourth, Anderson himself stood on the sidewalk. He wore his robe and Geneva tabs, and HE welcomed that congregation to his church.

After the war, to express their gratitude, this Japanese-American congregation took up an offering and gave the money to Anderson to buy something to symbolize the unity of the church.

So Anderson, who was the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church General Assembly at the time, went to Iona, Scotland, the birthplace of Celtic Christianity.

While in Scotland he bought three Celtic crosses to symbolize the three major strands of American Presbyterianism, which he labored long and hard to bring together.

And those are the three crosses that form the one cross that the Moderator of our denomination is always given to wear.<sup>1</sup>

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I thought of that story this week, because today is a day about the unity of God's Church, World Communion Sunday.

Today is a day when Christians all over the world come together to celebrate the sacrament of communion. It's a day when differences in denominational beliefs are so much less important than what unifies us in Christ, what holds us together in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> As told by the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, in his sermon "Hold to the Good," preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, January 29, 2012.

We will, in our recorded worship this morning, be inviting you to take communion from home. Because even in the midst of a pandemic, God's grace transcends our physical separation at this moment, and God's grace holds all of us together.

So I thought of that story of Fourth Church in Chicago and that Japanese Christian congregation coming together because it's World Communion Sunday.

I also thought of that story because of the word: **together**.

"Together" is theme of our stewardship campaign for this fall. You can read about it on the front of your Harbinger for this morning.

And NOT being together has been one of the most enormous challenges for our church, for many churches, during the pandemic.

In fact, that's what the pandemic has done not just to churches, but to so many aspects of our society. It's taken the word "together"...and fractured it.

For example, what does it look like to get together with extended family during a pandemic?

For some, it looks like it did before the pandemic.

For others, it takes the shape of socially-distanced visits—seeing loved ones while maintaining space and wearing masks.

For others, it means NOT visiting loved ones in person, because of the risk of virus transmission.

And in some very sad situations, it has meant that a loved one has died in a hospital, with no family there by his or her side.

Together, just being together—has felt, at times, like it's been broken during these past months. Something all of us took for granted just 8 months ago—we can no longer take it for granted.

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That's the topic, the challenge for this sermon.  
Being together.

Our fall sermon series is entitled “Challenge and Response,” in which we explore different biblical texts that present a challenge to a person or to a group of people...and then we look at the response. And perhaps, in looking at the responses to challenges that are found in scripture, we can learn something about our own responses right now.

Take a look at our text for today.  
It's the story of Jesus, meeting a Samaritan woman at a well.

If you've ever heard this story before, you know—  
those two people, Jesus and this woman—  
they were *not supposed to be together*.

Do you remember the woman's response to Jesus, when he asks her for a drink of water?

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

Jews and Samaritans—according to the custom and practice of the day, not supposed to be together.

Then later in the story, when the disciples show up on the scene, John writes:

“They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman...”

Jesus and this unknown woman?  
They were not supposed to be together.

And yet, the most curious part about this text may be how Jesus ended up in this situation. It looks like a coincidence, Jesus stopping by Jacob’s well, heat of the day, he’s tired, he takes a break, and a woman happens to come to the well...

It sounds like a random encounter.  
But did you notice how the story begins?

“...he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.”

He HAD to go through Samaria...

On the face of it, it sounds like a GEOGRAPHICAL statement.  
Samaria lies in between Judea and Galilee, so of course Jesus had to go through Samaria.

But John did not write, “...he happened to go through Samaria.”  
John wrote, “...he had to go...”

See, the Gospel writer John LOVES to write stories with multiple meanings in mind.

And I suspect that verse:  
“...he had to go through Samaria,”  
isn’t just a directional statement.

I suspect it's actually a THEOLOGICAL statement.

A statement about what Jesus was called to do.

To go to people whom others would not go to.

To talk to people whom others would not talk to.

He had to go...he had to go to a place that other people in his shoes may not have wanted to go. That place wasn't just Samaria. That place was a conversation with this unnamed, unknown woman.

A woman whose own voice, whose own opinions, whose own wishes...had probably not been listened to for a long, long time.

When Jesus says to her, "...you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband," please do not imagine her as the biblical version of Elizabeth Taylor.

We don't know the circumstances for how her marriages ended, but we DO know that she would have had absolutely no choice in those matters. In Jesus' day, she would have been passed from husband to husband like a piece of property.

Some scholars even suggest that her trip to the well at noon is an indication of how far outside her own social circle she actually is. The time when women would go to the well would be early in the morning. Why isn't she with those other women?

The fact that she was going at noon, according to these scholars, suggests, perhaps—a certain LONELINESS in her life, a certain amount of ISOLATION in her life.

Do you see what we're talking about here?

This unnamed Samaritan woman is on the fringes...

she comes from the wrong part of town,

she doesn't have a comfortable history,  
 she has no standing, no voice—  
 and that's why Jesus goes to her.

Because Jesus knows that this woman DOES have a voice.

And he listens to her voice,  
 and talks with her, and reveals who he is to her...  
 she goes back to her people and says:

*"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!  
 He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"*

And later on, John tells us that because of this woman's VOICE,  
 because of her testimony, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in  
 him..."

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I wonder if there's something for God's Church to overhear in this  
 encounter too.

It strikes me that so many churches, ours included, have focused  
 on worship in the midst of the pandemic.

How do we do virtual worship?  
 How do we return to in-person worship?  
 How do we establish safe protocols for when we return to the  
 sanctuary for worship?

It's understandable.  
 All of us miss worship the way we used to know it.

But it also strikes me that what Jesus had to say about  
 worship...well, most of it can be found right here in this story.

And what he had to say about loving our neighbors, about reaching out to people on the fringes? It's found almost EVERYWHERE in the Gospels...

A recent *Washington Post* article told the story of Meg Heriford.

Meg Heriford is the owner of the Ladybird Diner in Lawrence, Kansas.

Like many other restaurant owners during the first months of the pandemic, Meg repurposed her closed diner to feed the homeless and hungry of her city.

She found an urgent clientele.

Now, as her community has begun a cautious reopening, Meg is left with an agonizing choice. Re-opening the diner she has lovingly nurtured into life, and serving her long-term clients who are eager to return—it sounds great!

But it would also mean turning away those who are now coming for free meals in a county that reports 9100 people out of work and homelessness on the rise.

As the article describes things:

“She’s been a small-business owner and a fixture in this Midwestern town for years, but now the pandemic had changed everything.

And it’s changed her.



On the one hand, Meg has her own family to feed.

On the other hand, there are the newly destitute families who come shyly, pushing their masked kids to the front of the line for sack lunches, for food to make it through the day.

‘This is noble work, feeding people. I don’t want to cheapen it, to try to cram as many nickels as I can into the piggy bank,’ she said.

Finally, Meg made a decision.

“‘I can’t write them out of it,’ she said.

“...whatever rebirth would happen for Ladybird had to include...the hungry people she’d been serving.

‘Maybe it will work, maybe it doesn’t.

But it definitely feels like it’s worth a shot.’”

Meg is now calling her establishment the Ladybird Diner Community Kitchen and Market – a combined community kitchen to feed the hungry—with a store selling produce and meals.

“Before the pandemic, each day at the diner had been a show, rough and imperfect but danced through with joy, with baby-kissing, laughter and high-fives.”

Will there be laughter and high-fives and joy in this new model of feeding those who can’t pay as well as those who can?

No one knows yet, but what we do know is that this one restaurant owner is literally putting her livelihood on the line, all in an effort to REDEFINE what “together” might mean...<sup>2</sup>

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It strikes me that this is what Jesus did all the time.  
He redefined what “together” means.

He did it with the woman at the well.  
He did it when he called Zaccheus down from that sycamore tree.  
He did it when he healed the Gerasene demoniac, and brought him back to his community.

He did it when he ate with Simon the Pharisee.  
He did it when he told us to love our enemies.  
He did it when he forgave his executioners from the cross.  
He did it when he appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus.

He did it...when he called Republicans and Democrats, Black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor, Atlanta Braves fans and even New York Yankee fans to be a part of the same church.

When he called all of us to go to the fringes of our own society, to find the forgotten, to have conversations with those whose voices have been ignored, and to find a way to bring the love and justice of God to everyone.

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I’m reminded of something that Carl Sandburg, the poet and biographer of Abraham Lincoln, once said.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/road-to-recovery/diners-coronavirus-kansas-reopen/2020/09/14/b8cd1b6a-d33e-11ea-8d32-1ebf4e9d8e0d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/road-to-recovery/diners-coronavirus-kansas-reopen/2020/09/14/b8cd1b6a-d33e-11ea-8d32-1ebf4e9d8e0d_story.html).

Sandburg was once asked by an interviewer what the UGLIEST word was in the English language.

Sandburg's face took on a thoughtful expression as he repeated, "The ugliest word in the English language..."

The interviewer and the television audience waited silently.

"The ugliest word?" said Sandburg, concentrating hard.

He looked away...almost like he was trying to find the word on the wall of the room somewhere.

"Ugliest word....ugliest word..."

Finally, Sandburg turned toward the interviewer.

"The ugliest word," he said,

"the ugliest word is....*EXCLUSIVE*."<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> This story appears in *Preaching*, by Fred B. Craddock, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985.