

**A Bold Adventure**  
**John 4.21-24**  
**October 4, 2020, World Communion**  
**Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church**



*Value: We will respect all religions by learning about the beliefs, values, and struggles of our neighbors and by demonstrating support for them.*

Can I just say how happy I am to be in worship with Pastor Anita and Pastor Patricia?

I am so blessed to have these powerful women with different experiences and their own spiritual wisdom and their many gifts in my life.

I'm looking for some "amens" in the comments.

And if you read the gospels, I think you can make a case that there are powerful women who, at crucial times, have a significant impact on the story of Jesus.

There's that Syro-Phoenician woman in Matthew [15.21-28] and Mark [7.24-29] who comes to Jesus with a desperate request to heal her tortured daughter. And Jesus first ignores her and then tries to put her in her place by saying, "I didn't come for *"you people,"* and then he insists that it is not right to give food for children to the dogs. Dogs!

But the woman persists. And Jesus acknowledges her faith. And her daughter is healed.

I think this is the turning point in the trajectory of Jesus' ministry. For Matthew and Mark, it changes how Jesus understands himself and his mission in the world.

In Luke, there are several women who travel with Jesus [Luke 8.2]. And guess what? They have names: Mary Magdalene; Joanna, related to King Herod's court; and Susanna. And "many others."

Just before that [Luke 7.36ff], a woman shows up at the house of a major religious leader who is entertaining Jesus. She wasn't invited to the party. But she shows up and makes everyone uncomfortable by anointing Jesus' feet ... and kissing them.

However awkward it might have felt, however much the host might have wanted her to go away, Jesus doesn't stop her and, in fact, defends her.

Her act, I think, forces Jesus to make a break with those religious leaders who cannot abide the sight of this intimate compassion and the truth about themselves.

These are “nasty women.” And I use those words as a term of admiration and inspiration. These are the “nasty” powerful women who take on the religious idolatry of their day and teach Jesus a lesson about himself and his own work.

And then we come to John 4 and Jesus’ interaction with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well. You can read the whole interchange for yourself. But suffice to say that this isn’t a polite conversation.

The Samaritan woman doesn’t just defer to this guy because that’s what “good” compliant women do. She corrects him. She confronts him. She challenges him. And even when she guesses that he may be a prophet, she doesn’t back down from the truth of who she is.

This is John 4.21-24.

*Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth, for my Abba seeks such as these to worship. God is spirit, and those who worship God, must worship in spirit and in truth.*

Now there are lots of things these two people would not be likely to talk about. God and worship are definitely two of them.

And it isn’t just that they are of different genders.

It isn’t just that they have related but different histories.

It isn’t just that they have different experiences,

or that they have different understandings of God and different places of worship.

They would not be likely to have this conversation because they have grown up in a culture that taught them to distrust and demonize the other.

And what’s worse: these two people are neighbors. The story says that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria to get to Galilee.

There is a regional proximity between these two. They are not antagonists because they live on opposite sides of the world and they don’t know anything about each other. They are neighbors.

They both struggle under the same imperial oppression.

They both suffer at the hands of a regime that maintains control by pitting them against each other.

They both have stories to tell about violence committed against them by the other.

Do you know that Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan *after* he and his followers have just been thrown out of a Samaritan village? It was such an affront that James and John ask Jesus if he wants them to call down fire from heaven to destroy them all. [Luke 9.51-56; 10.29-37] He doesn't.

The last thing the Empire wants is for Jews and Samaritans to start talking to each other; to start being neighborly; to start living up to that command that is in both of their religious traditions: "To love one's neighbor as one's self."

Beloved ones, it may be one of the greatest acts of resistance – one of our greatest acts of following the way of Jesus – to live up to this value: "We will respect all religions by learning about the beliefs, values, and struggles of our neighbors and by demonstrating support for them."

Now I find it fascinating that Jesus and the Samaritan woman are talking about worship. If you want to build a world of respect for all religions, doesn't any *particular* form of worship get in the way?

After all, the great St. John (Lennon) says that if you want to see the world as one, imagine no religion.

If the point Jesus is wanting to make is that there is coming a day – and, in fact, is now – when "you will worship God neither on the Samaritan sacred Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem" – you might think he would he would say that worship doesn't really matter anyway.

But he has just said that his own tradition is a saving one. There is something life-giving in the practice of his faith. He isn't repudiating his own tradition, but he sees something beyond it: A time when worshippers of God do so in spirit and in truth.

And what's more: God is *seeking* those worshippers.

During this series on our 6 values, Pastor Anita and Pastor Patricia and I are listening especially to the wisdom of Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

And in preparation for today and this World Communion, I have been listening again to the great Howard Thurman – teacher, pastor, author, civil rights activist, and the first African-American Dean of Boston University.

I have been paying attention especially to what he calls his "bold adventure." Perhaps that brings to mind the title of our Long Range Planning process: *Be Different, Be Bold, Be Better*.

Thurman's bold adventure started when he was asked to lead a friendship delegation to India in 1935. He was suspicious at first. Was he being sent to defend Christian colonialism or to paint a rosy picture of Black America? He wasn't willing to go if that was the case.

But he did decide to go because he wanted to learn. He wanted to understand the truth about the connections between slavery in United States and the impact of colonialism in India. He wanted to meet Gandhi and to feel some of the spirit of his work. He wanted to understand Jesus in a new way. It was a life-changing experience.

A few years after he returned, he received a letter from a White Presbyterian minister, Dr. Alfred G. Fisk. He was part of a group in San Francisco trying to establish an interracial congregation and he knew the only way for that to work would be to have both Black and White co-pastors.

Howard Thurman agreed to come. And the "bold adventure" of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples began. "I became truly aware," he says, "of the discovery I made in India – what is true in any religion is in the religion because it is true."

"God is seeking worshippers," Jesus says, "who worship in spirit and in truth."

Thurman says:

*Here at last I could put to the test once more the major concern of my life: Is the worship of God the central and most significant act of the human spirit? Is it really true that in the presence of God there is neither male nor female, child nor adult, rich nor poor, nor any classification by which [hu]mankind defines itself ... however meaningful?*

"The experience of worship became the keystone of the entire structure," Thurman says. It was: "... a celebration before God of the life lived during the week,"

"... a watering hole for the widely diverse and often disparate group of members and visitors from many walks of life,"

"... [it was a time when] individuals who were in the thick of the struggle for social change would be able to find renewal and fresh courage,"

"... it was a beachhead ... of community ... an inspiration to the solitary individual to put his/her weight on the side of a society in which no [one] need be afraid."

And how about this for timeliness "... By special grace, it emerged at a historic moment in world crisis created by the struggle between totalitarianism and democracy."

"... [worship in this community was a time, he says,] To find ultimate security in ultimate vulnerability, this is love."

If only worship could be all that, right?

Why can't it be?

What is our “bold adventure” of worship?

The “nasty” powerful women in Jesus’ life might tell us that it is the gathering that generates persistence in the face of prejudice and oppression. It is the expression of compassion that is up close and personal. It is sustaining your own identity while trusting a God who is seeking worshippers who carve our time for and live in the presence of spirit and truth.

Or, as Howard Thurman might say, it’s risking who you are to dare loving and being loved.

You know, if you turn to page 129 in our new 150 year history book, *Welcome Home*, you will see a picture of the plaque that hangs out on the Harvard side of the building. It was placed there in 1980 to identify our building as a historic landmark. And if you read it, it ends with these words: “Here is a church dedicated to the worship of God and human unity.” So how is that “bold adventure” going? Is it even what we are looking for?

Well, here’s the thing, whether or not *we* are looking for it, God is looking for *us*. God is seeking those who worship in spirit and in truth.

And today, in this time of worship together, if you hear God’s voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Howard Thurman’s autobiography is *With Head and Heart* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), see especially chapters IV and V.