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Date: October 20, 2019
Sermon Title: "When We Are Not At Our Best"
Scripture: John 4:4-26
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

John 4:4-26

But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' 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 know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that

Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Between us, Alida and I have 82 years of pastoral experience, and we are still learning. We just finished a three-week series of sermons on *Forgiveness*, preached in my 51st year and Alida's 31st year, and we're just now getting it down right: simple, direct, clear, rooted in faith, real to life.

Now that we've accomplished that, I'm tackling racism. It's a topic that has torn apart America, that has bedeviled Christianity, that has eluded solutions all over the world. But don't worry. In 17 minutes I'm going to solve it—tongue in cheek, obviously—but we will try.

The genesis of this sermon came in several steps. Last year, I preached a sermon called "Our Twin Sins: Racism and Anti-Semitism." It just seems that all too often no matter what else is going on, those two evils keep rearing their ugly heads. They go hand in hand. Scratch the surface of one, you'll likely find the other. And they have a lot in common: both rooted in bad science, bad history, bad religion, plain ignorance.

In ways large and small and too numerous to detail today, racism and anti-Semitism are always lurking. With that awareness, two books caught my eye. The first is by John Perkins, a legendary Mississippi Civil Rights evangelical African-American; his book is called *One Blood*. He's an old man now; he's seen it all, the worst and the best. His World War II veteran soldier brother was killed by a policeman in Mississippi shortly after the war. He lived his early adult years filled with hatred for whites. He lived the rest of his life empowered by Christ to love everyone and to show it every day in every way.

The second book is by a young North Carolina fed-up-to-here evangelical white radical pastor who wants us to finally grow up—grow up as Church people, as Americans, as white people; to "grow up and fly right," as my father used to say.

Both men, young and old, one radical and one reserved, one white and one black, one angry and one hopeful; both men, Christian, Biblical, fervent, demanding. Enough is enough. Enough excuses and rationales. Enough waiting. Enough telling people to "take it slow."

And somewhere along the line, I wrote my essay, "My America," that dared us, as Biblical people, as American citizens, to look boldly at ourselves and fix what needs fixing, change what needs changing, confess what needs confessing, call

out what needs calling out, repent what needs repenting, give up what needs giving up.

Back in my bad old days, I got kicked out of boarding school, and part of my restoration was summer school. Living in Queens, I took the subway every day all summer, to the end of the subway line in the Bronx, to attend the Riverdale School. Our only break was for lunch, when some of us skipped lunch to play basketball. I played with Calvin Hill, who went on to fame at Yale, then played for the Dallas Cowboys and the Redskins, a Super Bowl champion and a superstar. But that summer, he was just like me, a 17-year-old jock stuck in summer school.

Well, not quite like me. When we played basketball, he wore weights around his ankles. When we went running, he wore weights around his ankles. I started doing the same. Wow—that was awful! You can't jump. You can't move. You're slow as molasses. You are literally "weighted down." But when you take those weights off, you can soar! There's no stopping you! You're indestructible.

Years later, I showed the movie "Pilgrim's Progress" in my Church. Any of you forced to read *Pilgrim's Progress* growing up? It was written by John Bunyan in 1678, while a prisoner in England, jailed for his Christian faith. It tells the story of a man named Christian and his life's journey from the wickedness of this world to the joys of heaven. Along the way he faces everything we face, piling up failures, disappointments, sins; and those sins become a huge weight. In the movie, his sins get piled up like the weights on Calvin Hill's ankles, except in the movie, his sins are rocks he carries on his back. They are so heavy that he's bent over, he can't look up, he can't see straight, he can't progress to heaven. Until, at a pivotal moment, Christian comes to Calvary, the hill where Jesus was crucified, and at the foot of the cross, his backpack of heavy sins falls away. He can stand up straight. He can see clearly. He can make it to heaven.

Racism is a weight around our ankles, preventing us from soaring; a pile of rocks on our back, preventing us from standing up, seeing clearly, and even getting to "the Promised Land." America was meant to be "the Promised Land." Millions fled outrages elsewhere to get here. We were to be "the city on a hill." And we named our towns "New Canaan," "Providence," "Bethlehem," "Bethel," "Almost Heaven."

And the people brought here in slave ships and sold like animals, in shackles, these very people embraced the Biblical promises of "the Year of Jubilee" and the "New Jerusalem." And they sang the glories of Moses the Liberator and Elijah's Golden Chariot escaping death, and the Ship of Zion, all heading to the Promised Land.

Collectively, we believed that, even if, individually, whether year by year or person by person or town by town, we didn't let it happen. Not for everybody. Those shackles were strong. Made of iron a long time. They cut deep into the flesh. Made of Jim Crow laws a long time. They cut deep into the flesh. Made of plain old racism a long time; redlining, exclusion, stereotypes, voter suppression, lousy schools. They cut deep in the flesh. Those shackles are strong.

What is the way forward? The harsher of the two books is by the white guy. He's the young firebrand, and his solution is an age-old, common sense one: get to know one each other. The history of humanity is one group not liking another group. Exacerbated by isolation, segregation, alienation. Tribes. Clans. Races. Neighborhoods. Nations. Religion. Culture.

We used to let mountains divide us. Or rivers. Then language. Now, politics. I don't know you. You don't know me. That's the true definition of "ignorance," from the Greek: "ig," meaning "without," and "gnosis," meaning "knowledge." Ig-gnosis, ignorant, "without knowledge."

Do you know how Habitat for Humanity started? Everybody thinks it was Jimmy Carter. Or me. But long before that, there was a Southern Baptist pastor, a Bible scholar, back in the 1940s, who grew tired of preaching and teaching about racial reconciliation. He decided to live it. He brought a few hundred acres in rural Georgia, invited black and white neighbors to work together, plant together, harvest together, dream and scheme together, just like regular folks, like neighbors being neighborly.

Habitat grew out of that. Well, the white author of one of today's books, he got tired of preaching and teaching, intellectualizing racial reconciliation, and so he and his family and some of his white Christian friends decided to live it, plain and simple. They moved into a black neighborhood, joined a black Church, became neighbors, started being neighborly. In one of his chapters, he retells the story of today's Scripture about Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

You've heard the straight story. Jesus walks into a village in Samaria. Samaria is in Israel. But the rest of Israel doesn't like Samaria, and Samaria doesn't like the rest of Israel. No intermarriage. No going to Church together. No living near one another. Nothing to do with one another. And certainly *not* using the same water fountain.

Yet, Jesus asks a Samaritan woman at the water fountain, the town well, for a drink of water. She's surprised, maybe offended, certainly snippy. The Bible records their interaction this way: "The Samaritan woman said to Jesus, 'You're a Jew, I'm a Samaritan and a woman. How can you ask me for a drink?'" (John 4:9)

With that, they begin a rather in-depth conversation, each letting the other know what they're about; each being pushed and pushing back; each standing their ground and giving ground; each using their time together to explain themselves, to be real, genuine, authentic. They also dance around certain topics: religious symbolism, cultural differences, lifestyle choices. But they're working at it; they're trying.

At the end, the woman says, "One day the Messiah will come and explain everything to us." And Jesus declares, "I am that person." I'm what you're looking for. In effect, we fulfill each other. We complement each other. We need each other. Jesus and us. Me and you.

The white North Carolina pastor retells the story Southern style, rural America, down-home style. He likened Jesus being in Samaria to a white man walking through a black neighborhood, getting invited up onto somebody's front porch, each looking at the other a little askance. Some awkward silences. Some fits and starts in the conversation. So finally, after some sweet lemonade has been poured, each lets down their guard a little, they begin to tell their stories.

In telling their stories, like the Samaritan woman at the well, they meet their salvation. The author's point is we need to spend more time on one another's porches. We need to be in each other's places where we are most at home, where we can most be ourselves. Invite someone onto your porch. Go up on their porch. Sit a spell.

"Let me tell you about my grandmother." "You tell me about your kids." "How's work?" "We're visiting colleges this weekend." "You got any plans?" "I've got to go shopping, want to come?" "Need anything?" "I see that bumper sticker on your car. Tell me about it." Show some interest. Be of interest. "Listen, I've been thinking about this or that (fill in the blank). What do you think?" Start small. Go big. You don't have to solve the problems of the world in one conversation. But some of those problems, like racism, need to be solved.

It's that simple. I didn't say *easy*. I said simple. I started off saying that the world has long been divided. Who's on this side of the river. Who's on the other side. We progressed to who's on this side of the tracks, who's on the other side of the tracks. This school or that school. This Church, that Church. This club, some other club. My color. Not my color. Humanity has forever sought to define the in group versus the out group. Saved versus unsaved. O.K., not O.K.

We are seeing that all over American society, how much, how often we don't know each other. East and West Coasts and America's heartland, the flyover states. We don't know each other. Bridgeport and Fairfield. Rural and urban. White collar and blue collar. The young and the not so young. All the shades of

color and lands of ancestry. We don't know each other. Racism is called America's "original sin" because it's been around from the beginning. It grew up with us, embedded in us, part and parcel of us.

I've read some criticisms of *The New York Times* for their "1619 Project," but I like it because it's so hard. It's a hard truth that slavery in America began in 1619. I'm a New York City kid, New England born and roots, but New York growing up. So I understood racism and slavery fully. It was a Southern thing, period, end of story. We New Englanders came to America for freedom. Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock for freedom. We Northerners fought for freedom. See how clear that is? North good—freedom. South bad—racism. I don't need any *New York Times* "1619 Project" claptrap.

It took a lot of years of growing up, a lot of years of reading up, a lot of years of waking up before a clearer picture took root. KKK rallies in Maine. Grand Wizards living in Connecticut. A cross-burning in my childhood Queens neighborhood. New England businesses, insurance companies, shipping, textiles, profiting from slavery, slave trade, slave labor. Murderous anti-Civil War riots in Manhattan.

And through it all, through 400 years of slavery, Jim Crow, KKK, and racism, Christianity has too often been at the center, on the wrong side. And a lot of times, people slough it off as "human nature." Just the way things are.

I had a dear, wonderful, caring, hard-working Church member years ago assure me, "I love everybody. But . . ." And when somebody tells you they love everybody, there is always a "but." "But," she said, "birds of a feather flock together." To which I say: A., We're not birds. B., That's not America. And C., that's not Christian.

So I think Jesus went to that Samaritan village on purpose, with a plan. He could have bypassed the town. Or he could have fetched a drink himself. I think Jesus talked to that woman on purpose. I think Jesus asked her for water, climbed up on her porch, swapped stories on purpose. I think he was saying that segregating wells, segregating towns, segregating religions is *not* human nature.

Indeed, the whole central idea of Christianity, of little baby Christmas Jesus being born to Mary in Bethlehem, of the "Incarnation," of God becoming human, the whole idea is for Jesus to show us human nature. What we *can* be. What we *should* be.

I was reading the *Boston Globe* newspaper this week. The Arts section had an art museum review of Winslow Homer's Civil War painting and then a review of a new history book about the United States Constitution after the Civil War, specifically the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, which brought real civil rights in line with

the early promises of this "Promised Land." The Winslow Homer exhibit highlights, the reviewer said, a much better painting by another American painter, Thomas Nast, a painting of Abraham Lincoln in Richmond, Virginia, being "embraced by blacks and whites alike as the great liberator and paragon of freedom."

(Whyte, Murray. "Seeing Winslow Homer and the Fog of War in 'Eyewitness'" *The Boston Globe*. October 6, 2019, pp.N7, N13)

That's the Savior idea. That's like Jesus himself, like Jesus in Samaria: Someone comes into our world in a human way to lift up our idea of human nature, proving that we're better than we give ourselves credit for.

The book on the Constitution, on the importance of the three post-Civil War amendments, is a reminder that we humans need all the help we can get. Yes, from above—from God. Yes, from inspiration. Yes, from our better selves. And yes, also, from our laws. Our government. Our society.

You know, maybe Jesus really did know what he was talking about. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Climb up on that porch. Sit a spell. Share stories.

Our final hymn is "In Christ There Is No East Or West," page 7 in your bulletin:

*In Christ there is no east or west,
In him no south or north,
But one great fam'ly bound by love
Throughout the whole wide earth.*

*In him shall true hearts ev'rywhere
Their high communion find;
His service is the golden cord
Close binding humankind.*

*Join hands, disciples in the faith,
Whate'er your race may be!
Who serve each other in Christ's love
Are surely kin to me.*

*In Christ now meet both east and west,
In him meet south and north,
All Christly souls are one in him
Throughout the whole wide earth.*