

### Gospel of John, Part 8: Who's Got It Right?

[After going to the communion table and dipping out a cup of water from the glass basin there.] Starting back in the fall, the “Alive” Adult Sunday School Class here at First read and discussed the book *I Think You're Wrong, but I'm Listening*, co-authored by Sarah Steward Holland and Beth Silvers. I wasn't able to participate due to the sermon discussion class. But from what I hear, and from what they shared on several Wednesday nights, it was an important and timely topic. Especially in this election year.

In our world today there are all kinds of opportunities to disagree over issues or beliefs we hold as important, whether those issues are political in nature, or religious, or socio-economic, or theological, or ethical, or any combination of these categories. There are all kinds of opportunities—dare I say, temptations—to think that we are right and others are wrong. Those of you who were here last Sunday know that I “stepped into it” a little in my sermon (to use an agricultural expression). Or maybe a lot. I treasure the fact and deeply appreciate that afterwards I heard both from those who agreed with what I said and those who disagreed, those who appreciated it and those who did not appreciate it. As the title of the book *I Think You're Wrong*, implies, it is absolutely crucial that we keep listening to one another, that we find a way to disagree and still be in communion, still be church together, still be the body of Christ, a body having both ears and eyes, hands and feet. A body where each part needs the other.

How ironic that today's story from the Gospel of John, which was simply the very next passage, happens to be about two groups of people who disagree with one another. I'm talking about the Jews and the Samaritans.

The Jews in this story are those who consider themselves God's chosen people. They are direct descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (whose name was changed by God to Israel). Their forebears were among those who Moses led out of Egypt, out of captivity, led to the foot of Mount Sinai where God himself gave them the Torah, their guidebook for how to live. Jesus was a Jew. So were his first disciples.

And then we have the Samaritans. They too considered themselves descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. Their forebears were also among those whom God delivered from slavery in Egypt. But their story took a slightly different turn. They were among those tribes who settled in what came to be called the Northern Kingdom. And when the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian empire in 722 BCE, some of these Israelites were taken into captivity. Those who were left behind ended up mating with the foreign colonists brought in by the Assyrian conquerors. Their descendants came to be called “Samaritans.”

They had also inherited the faith of their fathers. They also considered themselves God's chosen people. They also worshiped Yahweh, and following the Torah as their holy guidebook for how to live. Doesn't this also make them Jews, like any other? Apparently not. Despite the similarities, there were some significant differences. Not only were the Samaritans the products of mixed marriages, and therefore considered unclean by the “pure” Jews. They had some different beliefs, different, we might say, views. They only followed as sacred scripture the first five books of the Torah, sometimes referred to as the Pentateuch. And based on that scripture, they believed that the place Yahweh had ordained as their place of worship was Mt. Gerazim.

Not the temple in Jerusalem, where the pure blood Israelites worshipped. Those *judaoi*, or Judeans, as John refers to them. Which is usually translated as “the Jews.”

So it is no small irony when we read at the beginning of Chapter Four that Jesus, having decided to go back north to Galilee, “had to” go through Samaria. Technically that wasn’t true. If avoiding Samaria was a high priority, there were other routes he and his disciples could have taken to get to Galilee. So when John says Jesus “had to go through Samaria,” we get the feeling that something more powerful than mere geography was guiding him.

And so Jesus comes to the city called Sychar, and he rests beside a well there, a well that just happened to have great religious significance to both Jews and Samaritans. As he is resting, a Samaritan woman comes to draw water, and, well, you heard what happened next.

Why did Jesus engage her in conversation? Especially when Jews believed Samaritans were unclean, and therefore to be avoided (lest these more pure and righteous Jews be defiled)? Was it really because he was thirsty?

This woman apparently could tell right away that Jesus was a Jew (John doesn’t say how; maybe from the clothes he wore). And she was taken aback that he would even speak to her (especially given that his request would involve handing him a cup of water—that request had ritual defilement written all over it). She knew how this Jewish man likely thought of her. She might even have been a bit resentful about it. Who do those Jews think they are? “Why are you talking to me?” is what she blurts out. Thus begins this conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus the Jew. Did you know that this conversation is the single longest conversation between Jesus and anyone else in the entire New Testament?

The first thing they talk about is water—more specifically, the water from this well, known as Jacob’s Well. Who was their common ancestor. The woman quickly figures out that Jesus isn’t talking about the kind of water you draw from a well and drink from a cup. He’s talking about something he calls “living water,” which apparently he can provide. A water that once she “drinks” it will bubble up—or more literally, “leap up”—inside her to eternal life. How could she not be dubious? And, how could she not be intrigued at the same time?

Things turn decidedly uncomfortable when he tells her to go call her husband. She says “I have no husband,” and he replies she has had five husbands and is toying with a possible sixth, and she had to have been absolutely floored, stunned, shocked. How could he know that about her? Who was he?

It doesn’t take long for their differences, their disagreements, to come “leaping up” to the surface. She brings it up, how she and her people worship at Mt. Gerazim, but he and his people say you have to worship at Jerusalem. “So,” she seems to be asking, “who’s got it right?” And what does he say? “Salvation is from the Jews.” You can feel her hackles rising. I can feel my hackles rising. That sure wasn’t a particularly helpful thing to say, or a particularly effective way to bridge disagreements over issues, be they political, religious, socio-economic, theological, or ethical. It wasn’t even “I think you’re wrong, but I’m listening.” It was just “You’re wrong, and I’m right.”

But then comes the breakthrough. “The hour is coming,” he says, “and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.” In other words, Jews and Samaritans will both be wrong. And, they’ll both be right. There is a more holy way to worship, a way that will bring them both together. There is a higher way to think. Even now, it is already here. Is he talking about himself? Is Jesus “the way?”

Who do you suppose the modern-day Samaritans are, those people who everyone knows “got it wrong?” At the risk of stepping into it, might it be those who vote Republican? Those who vote Democrat? Might it be the MBs, the Mennonite Brethren, those who think the only proper way to be baptized is by immersion? Although, in a town like Hillsboro, where we former “GCs,” now known as “MCUSA-ers,” are seriously outnumbered, it’s probably we who are the Samaritans. Which by the way is not fair, because I am as pure-blood Russian Mennonite as they are, and my paternal forebears were all MB!

I’m being facetious, of course. Last night there was a wonderful dinner and program in the Richert Fine Arts Center at Tabor College to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of MCC, or Mennonite Central Committee. Presumably, some of us there were Samaritans, and some of us Jews. But it didn’t matter. MCC is the service agency of both the MBs and Mennonite Church USA. The executive director of MCC Central States, Michelle Armster, happens to be an African American woman, with a huge singing voice, and she gave a great sermon, which she both began and ended with the same African American spiritual, “We’ve Come This Far by Faith.”

By the way, in this morning’s story about the Samaritan woman at the well, let’s not miss the fact that when she ran back to her village to tell her fellow Samaritans about the man who “told me everything I have ever done,” John says that they believed in him simply on the basis of her testimony. And, then invited him to stay there for two days. When in last week’s story, John told us that Jesus’ fellow Jew Nicodemus, and he a Pharisee, had only believed because of the signs Jesus was doing. Apparently it’s not a bad thing after all to be a Samaritan.

Jesus is the way. Come, let us follow him together. Let us drink of his living water. Let us keep on learning what it means to worship, to think, to speak in spirit and in truth.

We’ll talk more about spirit, and truth, and living water in the sermon discussion class. For now, let us sing our hymn of response. (And would someone help me wipe my shoes off?)

### **Questions for Pondering and Discussion**

In our world, and especially in our country, what are some of the issues people tend to most quickly and vociferously disagree about? Why? What is at stake in these issues?

What do we have to do in order to [be able to] listen to one another?

Who are the “Samaritans” and who are the “Jews?”

On what basis do we tend to treat some people as “Samaritans?” What are the issues we tend to disagree about (including specifically religious issues, those issues having to do with “salvation”)?

What are the places to which we tend to avoid going?

What might Jesus have meant when he said “salvation is from the Jews?”

Is it possible to be both wrong and right?

What might he have meant when he talked about worshipping “in spirit and in truth?”