

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Joining Jesus On His Mission*
Service Theme: *The River Moved*

Sermon Theme: *The River Moved* (April 23, 2023)
John 4:4-26

It's a beautiful bridge. The kind of strong, sturdy, long bridge every bridgebuilder would be proud of! But the state-of-the-art Choluteca bridge in Choluteca, Honduras has one problem: **The River Moved**. If you look at aerial photos of the Choluteca bridge, you'll find that instead of spanning the Choluteca River like you might expect, the bridge spans dry land, standing next to the river!

In 1998, a tropical storm in the Western Caribbean strengthened to a Cat 5, named Hurricane Mitch. By the time Mitch reached the Honduran coast, it had weakened to a Cat 1, and stalled there for a few days, dumping over 6 feet of rainwater. And all that water came crashing down from the mountains into the Choluteca River Valley so fiercely that it literally changed the course of the river. In just a few days, a well-built, well-positioned bridge became entirely obsolete. Not because of anything wrong with the bridge, but because the river moved.

That's kind of a modern parable for what the Christian Church in America is facing today: the river has moved. The culture has shifted. At one point in America's history, the church spanned our society, standing strong in our cultural priorities. When people moved to a new town, one of their first tasks was finding a church. Attending and serving in the church were unquestioned parts of most people's lives. In 1990, about 90% of the US population claimed to be Christian. Which means, just by existing, most Christian churches could expect people to flock through their doors.

But 30 years later, in 2020, that 90% of American Christians had dropped to 64% of the US population. 30% now claim no religious affiliation whatsoever—rising nearly 1% per year since 2007.

Today, only 20% of “church goers” actually attend worship on any given Sunday, and less than 10% of adults under age 30 regularly participate in the life of a congregation. Trust in clergy and organized religion are at all-time lows. We've even begun the shift from a “post-churched” culture—people who have walked away from the church, to a “pre-churched culture,” people who have never been connected to a church! Christianity's well-built strategy of constructing churches and expecting people to come to us has become somewhat obsolete—out of place.

So what can the church do? Sit here and do nothing, watching the river flow uninterestedly by, hoping someday the river will move back again? Gather in the safety of the four walls of a church for an hour per week as passive consumers who never take the Gospel with us when we go back out into the changed culture? Or, can we live our lives like what we've become? Missionaries in a growing mission field of people who don't know, or don't care about Jesus in our own neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools To not sit around and wait for people, but join Jesus on his mission to which he has called us: ***“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation;” “Go and make disciples of all nations.”*** The river has moved, so if we Christians want people to be saved—and I sure hope we do!-- we have to take the good news of Jesus out to the people God has placed all around us!

Jesus knew that too. His entire earthly ministry revolved around meeting people where they were-- both physically and spiritually. That's why our sermon text begins, ***“Now [Jesus] had to go through Samaria.”*** Only, he didn't really have to—at least, not geographically. Although Samaria sat dead center between Judea in the southern end of Israel, and Galilee in the northern end, almost every Jew avoided Samaria, willingly extending their trip so they could cross the Jordan River and bypass Samaria on the other side.

The Jews hated the Samaritans, and vice-versa, because Samaritans weren't full-blood Jews. They were the descendants of the few people from the Northern tribes of Israel who were left behind when the rest

were deported by the Assyrians. Those Jews then intermarried with Gentiles who resettled the area. Not only were they ethnically mixed, Samaritans were also a spiritual mixed bag of Jewish and pagan religious practices. They were therefore rejected; judged; avoided. Except by Jesus.

Jesus had to go through Samaria. Not geographically, but because there were people there who were far from God that needed to know the truth! One was the Samaritan woman Jesus meets at the well in Sychar. She was an outcast not just to the Jews, but to her own people too. Notice that she came to the well to draw water about noon. You didn't go to draw water at the hottest part of the day—much like you don't mow your lawn at high noon in the Florida summer! You do it in the early morning or late evening to beat the heat. She came to draw water at noon to avoid the glares and whispers of her fellow townswomen!

But while everyone else avoided her, Jesus went right where he needed to be! And since the river moved, it's so important for us to follow in Jesus' footsteps here! If this Samaritan woman was a 21st-century American, she'd likely never step foot into a Christian church, and might even be avoided by the people inside the church if she did. So Jesus met her where she was—both physically and spiritually. Can we do the same for those around us who don't know or don't care about Christ?

Easier said than done in a culture that seems to be flowing away from and past the Christian church, right? But Jesus presents a masters class here on connecting people to the Gospel who aren't looking for it.

Again, Jesus didn't sit back and hope this Samaritan woman would come listen to one of his sermons. He went where she would be. We do this all the time too, even if unintentionally. We go to restaurants, coffee shops, barbershops and grocery stores where we're regulars, and get to know the servers, baristas, barbers, and baggers who wait on us. You have a go-to mechanic. You work with the same co-workers. You have classes with the same classmates. Almost every day, we go to places where we know certain people will probably be.

And after being in the right place at the right time, Jesus intentionally struck up the conversation with her. At first, it was simple. They were at a well, so Jesus asked her for a drink of water. Believe it or not, joining Jesus on his mission doesn't mean your first conversation with people has to be an exegetical explanation of John 3:16 in the original Greek. It's usually about their job, their family, their hobbies, their sports teams, or the weather. Although it sounds obvious, telling people about Jesus first requires us to begin the conversation with them!

While Jesus' request seems simple, it had an impact on the woman. It would have been shocking for a Jewish man to talk to a Samaritan woman in public! And even short conversations with people might impact them too. Do you think it would be meaningful to your waitress, who usually only hears orders and complaints from her customers, if you took the time to notice her, and ask a question about her life?

Now, while Jesus jumps from starting the conversation into spiritual matters pretty quickly, your first conversation with someone might not broach spiritual matters at all. And that's OK. As the Son of God who knew people's hearts, minds, and life circumstances, Jesus had a bit of an advantage on us. But that's why we have to be intentional about keeping the conversations going and building on the relationship the next time we see those people. We need to pay attention with open eyes and ears for one important factor—people's perceived needs.

That is, what they think is most important and necessary for them at that time. Jesus addressed the woman's perceived need for water by telling her, ***“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. The water I give them will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*** But ultimately, in addressing her perceived need, Jesus got to the heart of what she really needed.

She was an outcast in her town, because she wore the shame of five past divorces and a current live-in lover like a scarlet letter on her forehead. She needed forgiveness; love; acceptance, and commitment.

But she was looking for them in all the wrong places. Jesus wanted to show her the only thing that could give her everything she needed—him!

We can't see into people's hearts and minds like Jesus could. But you can get to the heart of people's perceived needs simply by talking to them, and actively, attentively listening to what they say, and watching what they do. What are they afraid of, or worried about? What topics make them shift uncomfortably? What are their hopes and dreams? What do they say they most want or need? The more time you spend building trust by talking with and listening to your neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances, and friends, the more likely their perceived needs will become visible. And once you understand their perceived needs, like Jesus, you can transition the conversation to show them the only one who can truly meet their needs!

When I was at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, I went on two mission trips with some fellow pastors in training, and one of our professors. We'd go out knocking on doors in neighborhoods, or walking through parks, trying to spark conversations about Jesus with people. And without fail, our professor would strike up a conversation with someone that eventually transitioned into sharing his faith in Jesus. He was like an evangelism machine! So we asked his secret. I've never forgotten it, and I hope you'll remember it and put it into practice too! He said: 1.) Be friendly, be yourself, and smile. 2.) Be intentional about asking them questions that get deeper than surface level, and actively listen to what they say. Then, inevitably, when they share something they're struggling with or worried about, he'd ask this question: ***“Can I share something with you that helps me when I'm struggling like that?”***

No one ever says no! Because we all want help, hacks, and answers, right? And when they say yes, boom! There's your opening to tell them about Jesus' love; forgiveness; presence; providence; protection, or promises. To show them how Jesus meets their every perceived need. Basically, it's our opportunity to pull back the curtain and let that

person see Jesus standing before them, saying like he did to the Samaritan woman, ***“I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”***

Jesus had to go through Samaria, so that Samaritan woman could be saved, and so others could be saved! After this conversation with Jesus, this woman who spent her days avoiding her fellow citizens ran back to town to tell everyone about Jesus. And people came to faith in Jesus because of her words!

Can that be our mindset too? We have to go to that office; to that barber's chair; to that restaurant; to that classroom; to that cul de sac. Maybe not geographically, but because there were people there who are far from God, who need to know the truth you know!

I want to challenge you to identify one person this week that you want to be intentional about building your relationship with. Maybe it's someone you see often, but haven't really talked to—strike up a conversation! Maybe it's someone who's a surface-level acquaintance—invite them out for dinner, or a cup of coffee, and get to know them better. And as you talk, actively listen for their perceived needs. If the moment is right and the conversation turns to Jesus then and there, go for it! God promises to give you the words to say. But if it doesn't, then take that person's perceived needs home with you and consider, “How can I show them how Jesus meets their needs?”

The river has moved, dear brothers and sisters in Christ! So we need to move too! Let's go, and see how God moves in us, and through us, as we join Jesus on his mission to win souls for the kingdom!