

## **Chance Encounters of a Most Unexpected Kind** (John 4: 5-42)

Homily by John Carrington, March 8, 2026

I've been thinking ... Oh oh! I can already hear Eleanor. She knows what thinking is for me. Diving into the infinite three dimensional array of boxes I have in my mind where all my thoughts are stored. Once there, I'm a goner.

Nevertheless, I have been thinking. About an experience Eleanor had recently, about our Gospel reading this morning and about remarks that Reverend Maria and Brother Reg have been making about identity and community the past while.

One of Eleanor's life pleasures is grocery shopping. Every week she visits three stores, shopping list in hand. For her shopping is an experience, gliding up and down the aisles looking, touching and choosing. It is something we rarely do together. For me, it's a task, something to get done and then to get home. And if items are not where I think they should be she gets an earful. So keeping peace in our family is letting her grocery shop while I rummage around in the boxes in my mind. Works well for me.

Two months ago Eleanor was at Food Basics. While there she accidentally nudged the cart of another woman. She and Pari, got talking. Pari told her, "Don't buy the grapes here. The price is better at Bayview and Cummer." "Oh, I know," Eleanor said. "But thank you." (Of course she would know. She's a walking encyclopedia of grocery prices.) Over the next little while they kept on bumping into each other. Finally, just as she was finishing, down the aisle came Pari. In her hand was a huge chocolate bar. She came up to Eleanor, gave her a big hug and said, "Happy Birthday. You are the nicest person I have ever met. I can't wait to get home to tell my mother about you. Oh, and here's the bill to prove that you've paid for the chocolate!" I am sure that Pari did exactly that because Eleanor did the very same thing. Her

meeting Pari was the first thing she told me about after she got home. A chance encounter of a most unexpected kind.

This morning's reading from John has a lot packed packed into its thirty-seven verses. Sometimes I think Maria intentionally browses through the lectionary thinking, "I wonder what John will do with this. Hmmm, these thirty seven verses should keep him busy!" Well Maria, they certainly did.

This is the well known story about Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. It is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in the Gospels. It follows John's account of the meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus that was last Sunday's gospel. I was thinking that Simon Davis might have preached about that then. Instead he spoke eloquently about Abram's call to follow God into the unknown.

Let's take a moment to recall Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a man with a name, a Pharisee, educated, religious and moral. He sought out Jesus by night. The woman, on the other hand, was just that, a woman. She had no name. She was a Samaritan, not a Jew. She was an outcast with a dubious reputation. She was almost flippant in her remarks to Jesus. And her encounter with him was by chance, in full daylight around noon time.

The conversations the two have are even more extraordinary. Despite his curiosity about Jesus, Nicodemus just can't move beyond the bounds of his religious understandings. He really didn't get it. The Samaritan woman, on the other hand, is ready to think outside the box. To consider new ways of spiritual thinking. These two encounters couldn't have been different.

So, let's see how her conversation plays out. First of all, Jesus initiates the conversation, a cultural no-no of the day as the woman so pointedly comments, "How is it that you, a Jew, asks a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Think about this for a moment ... Jesus has the advantage over the woman. He's a man and he's a Jew. Ironically though, he's also at a disadvantage. He's a

foreigner. He's tired. He's thirsty. He's a man without a bucket. This woman isn't going to be put off. She deflects Jesus' puzzling comment about his being able to give her living water. "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep." No bucket - no water. Gotcha! She was on a roll. "Are you greater than our ancestor, Jacob, who gave us this well ... ?" Like Nicodemus' confusion about being born again of the Spirit, she thinks the living water Jesus is talking about is the well water. Jesus explains. "All who drink the water I will provide them will never get thirsty again; it will be a source of water within them, a fountain of unending life." Hmmm ... I can almost see her wheels turning. Something is happening. Oh, she's sharp. I paraphrase. "So give me some of this water, the water you are talking about. I'm tired of being thirsty and I don't want to have to keep on coming back here to draw water."

Then, in a very Jesus-like twist, he instructs her to go call her husband and return. Well, that's awkward. She doesn't have one. Further though, she's had five and now she is now living with someone else. Oops! Jesus simply replies, "You are right". No judgment. No criticism. Just, "You are right." And here's where everything changes. In that instant the woman realizes she is speaking to someone much greater than a mere stranger. The conversation moves on to worship. Jesus breaks with Jewish practice, telling her that location no longer matters, be it Mt. Gerizim for a Samaritan or the temple a Jew. "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." And in a moment of insight she says, "I know the Messiah is coming" to which Jesus said, "I am he."

And what did the woman do? (Oh, would that we knew her name!) She raced back to the city to tell everyone what had happened. She said she thought Jesus was the Messiah. Some believed directly from what she said. Others went out to see Jesus at the well and came to the same conclusion. Another chance encounter of a most unexpected kind.

This is an absolutely marvellous story. It's about an unexpected encounter between the two most unlikely of characters leading to an "Aha" moment, an epiphany actually. When I started working on this homily I couldn't help but think about Eleanor and her chance meeting with Pari at Food Basics.

It also says a great deal about how we identify ourselves. If I were to ask you, "Who are you? How do you identify yourself?", what would you say? Just exactly who are you to you? A woman? A man? A homemaker? A provider? A mother? A father? Any number of things.

Secretly we might be saying "a failure", "a no-good", "unreliable". Things we wouldn't want to say publicly. I wonder how many of us would say "a follower of Jesus, a Christian". Hmmm.

Whether we realize it or not, we identify in very particular ways. As Canadians we typically identify with common cultural values. We speak English, French, or both. We rally around cries like "We the North!" and "Elbows Up". We appreciate collegiality in our relationships and we use "eh" as a speech marker. All of these aspects bind us together helping create a sense of community.

How we identify combines with our other understandings to create our world view of things. This world view is the filter or lens we use to judge, evaluate and generally make sense out of all that is going on around us, be it personal, communal or global. Invariably, we bring these convictions into all our evaluations about our lives, our beliefs, our expectations, our self-identities. Like it or not, our perceptions are really our realities.

Let me give you an example. Several years ago Reg led a series about racism in Canada, aboriginal, black and Asian. During one of the discussions Reg got quite animated and loud. I found it disturbing and said, "Reg, take a breath. Calm down." His response was, "Don't ever speak to me that way again. Getting excited and speaking loudly is part of my culture. You know

nothing of my heritage at all!" Ouch! It was only several weeks ago that this exchange came up in a conversation we were having. I told him that I had really felt being put down and made guilty of matters as a white person over which I had no control. He told me that he felt that I was being a white supremacist. Two very different world views in collision.

Perhaps the most important thing to realize is that our world view incorporates all of our perceptions, biased and unbiased. Does it upset me to realize that I am never truly impartial? Not really. At least I know where I am starting from. Rather than letting my world view lead me to quick decisions, just maybe, I'll stop and take enough time to actually listen and hear what someone else is saying. To actually try to understand where they are coming from. And, you know, in doing so my world view may start to change a bit, to incorporate something new I may have taken from that exchange. Understand. World views are not fixed. They are continually morphing as we encounter and evaluate new experiences.

Think about the interaction between the woman and Jesus. How did she see Jesus? As a man? - "Here I go again, kowtowing to a guy. He's probably going to expect me to draw some water for him." As a Jew? - "This is bad. He's probably going to try to lord it over me. (Pardon the pun.) I don't want anything to do with Jews." As a critic? - "Wait 'til he finds out who I really am." I imagine all kinds of thoughts like these were swirling around in her mind as the exchange began.

And how did Jesus see her? As a woman? - "How cruel, that she has to draw water in the heat of the midday sun. Nobody should have to do that." As a Samaritan? - "This woman is worth engaging with no matter how she worships." As a sinner? - "Poor woman. What a terrible go of things she has had." Inquisitive? - "She's not fooled about the water I am speaking of. She wants to know more. Insightful."

Notice how different these two frames of reference are. The woman, like any of us, views Jesus through all the different life experiences she has had; the cultural and societal values she holds; the faith she understands; and everything else that makes up her set of convictions and experiences.

Jesus, on the other hand, simply sees her as a fellow human being, a person of God. He is indifferent to her gender, social status or faith. She is just an individual willing to engage with him and learn about what he has to offer. Period.

This speaks to the idea of community. We form communities around people who identify similarly to us, where the feeling of “we” is core. We here at Holy Trinity identify as a community. We have a shared sense of belonging. We worship in a particular way. We socialize in particular ways. We see value in and support each other in ways that we do not necessarily encounter elsewhere.

Invariably, though, we see each other through our own particular frames of reference. These determine how we really feel about each other. So while we can feel great love and affection for each other we also can feel anger and resentment. Think of how we have come together to be a major supporter of Out of the Cold. How our prayer shawl group has provided comfort and meaning to countless elderly people. How we have supported numerous students and others with assistance from our Eva Rea Legacy Fund. Those are but a few examples of our trying to make the Kingdom of God a reality for others.

But remember also the Great Furniture Rearrangement Experiment that Canon Linda tried. (I speak tongue in cheek about an incident that happened here some 25 years ago.) She was attempting to make the altar more open and accessible for communicants. It failed and quickly led to acrimony and very hurt feelings. Those who were hurt thought, “Really important things to me are being over ridden and trampled upon. My opinion is no longer valid.”

Fortunately, with some assistance, we have been able to right the boat and come together again. I bring this up not to open old wounds but to remind us of how both community-building and community-damaging our personal world views can be.

Jesus was certainly at work building community with the Samaritan woman. He crossed gender boundaries. He engaged with her as a valid conversation partner. Further, he made clear to her who he was. He said, "I am he", when she asked who the Messiah was supposed to be. He crossed racial boundaries. He broke the distinction between "chosen people" and "rejected people" by extending the mission of the Jewish Messiah to include Samaritans, arch antagonists of the Jews.

Underpinning all of this, though, is Jesus saw this woman as a person of God, someone born in the image of God. What a wonderful way to enlist her into community. No judgments. No expectations. No history. Just God's child. For him she was a clean slate.

Oh, that we could see each other as clean slates! What if we viewed each other first and foremost as people of God? Not as female or male, black or brown, Jewish, Muslim or Christian? This story speaks so much of this. Of course we are not Jesus. Nor are we the woman. But both serve as important examples for us.

How might we be more Jesus-like in our communities? Making an effort to see that other person, first and foremost, as a person of God is a good starting place. Oh, how I wish I had seen Reg in that light at the beginning of our exchange! Learning to listen more attentively. Putting ourselves in their shoes to better understand where they are coming from. Accepting their point of view as important to them, even if we might not agree with it. Jesus did all of that.

How about the woman? Well, she engaged with Jesus even though her world view was likely screaming. "Turn away!" She continued to press Jesus for clarity when she didn't understand what he was saying. She showed vulnerability in being honest about her marital life. In her "Aha" moment her world view was recast. Her experience, so unexpected, prompted her to run back to the town and tell everyone what she had seen and heard.

Two weeks ago Maria gave us with some really good pointers about modifying our world views. We can start by saying "No" to overworking, to negative self-talk, and to not speaking up when our hearts really want to talk. Saying "No" to the temptation of constantly proving ourselves. We are not what we produce. We are already beloved and blessed by God. Saying "No" to systems that erase people - those overlooked, ignored or blamed in our society. Saying "Yes" to some self-compassion. We are nowhere near as bad as we think we are. And saying "Yes" to just being in the present - not rushing, not taking shortcuts, just being. Or as Jesus would tell us, "I have come so that you can have life and have it to the full."

Chance encounters of an unexpected kind happen to all of us. In the moment, do we recognize the opportunity? Or do we fall back on our world view of things to determine their worthiness? Eleanor and Pari will likely never meet again. Yet their chance meeting gave them both a moment to bask in the flicker of the divine which exists in both of them. I am sure Pari did go back and tell her mother. Eleanor came back and told me. And in doing so she became an example for me of being more open about engaging with people I do not know. (I am often more like the troll under the bridge when it comes to strangers.) But, there's the spin-off effect - how my experiences influence both me and the people around me.

Is there a lesson to be learned from all of this? There is. Community can only be built when we are not afraid of overcoming old prejudices. When we are willing to break the social conventions that dehumanize us. That is a good

starting point for us today as we continue on our Lenten journey of self-reflection and preparation for our greatest celebration of the year - Easter.

Thanks be to God.

*Amen.*

JKC, March 8, 2026 (18 ½ minutes)