

Presbyopia John 4:27-38 2/14/21

Several years ago, back when it was still possible to do such things, Bonnie and I were flying back from a visit with our daughter in Denver. It was a 3-4 hour flight, and I spent the time reading and watching the in-flight movie. When we got off the plane, I noticed that my vision was blurry when I tried to read the signs directing us to baggage claim. I couldn't figure out what was going on. I felt fine otherwise, so I didn't think I was having a stroke or something, but I was concerned. It gradually resolved, and I was able to drive us home from BWI.

After doing a little research, I discovered that I was experiencing visual accommodative dysfunction, or presbyopia. It's common in older people, whose eyes have difficulty adjusting to things farther away after focusing their vision on things close to them for an extended period, like I did on the plane. Presbyopia! Who knew? And, what a great metaphor for a spiritual condition that affected the Jewish people of Jesus' time, and still affects us today.

In the first century, the Jewish people (especially the Pharisees) were focused almost entirely inwardly- on keeping themselves pure and following the dictates of the Old Testament law. They had little concern for the Gentiles, and had a strong animosity toward the Samaritans, their closest neighbors. The Samaritans came into being when the Assyrians swept

through Israel in the 8th century BC, deported many people living there, and replaced them with people from other nations. These people intermarried with the remaining Israelites and adopted parts of Israelite religion. They revered the first five books of the Old Testament, but not the rest of it, and they built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim, which the Jewish people destroyed in 128BC. Jews of Jesus' time regarded Samaritans as ethnic and theological half-breeds, and avoided contact with them whenever possible. Jesus, however, didn't play by those rules.

In John 4, we find the story of Jesus' encounter with a woman while he was passing through Samaria. He finds her by a well at noon, which is an odd time for a woman to be drawing water, since it is in the heat of the day. He engages her in conversation, much to her surprise. He talks with her about living water, debates theological matters with her, and in response to her statement that she isn't married, points out she has actually been married five times and is currently living with a man who is not her husband! Ouch! That's probably why she was drawing water alone at noon. She was not welcome in polite society. The woman is amazed by Jesus, who identifies himself as the promised messiah! Here's what happens next.

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are

*you speaking with her?”*²⁸ *Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,*²⁹ *“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”*³⁰ *They left the city and were on their way to him. (John 4:27-30)* Good Jewish men didn’t speak to women in public. It simply wasn’t done, especially not by a rabbi like Jesus! And this woman was a Samaritan to boot. Two strikes! The woman’s response to her encounter with Jesus is very interesting. She becomes his first evangelist! She goes back to the town and invites everyone to come and meet him. She tells them that he was able to see into the secret depths of her life. And she wonders aloud if he could really be the Messiah.

Note that she was an unlikely person to be a witness for Jesus. She was not well-regarded in her community. And she had serious questions about Jesus which she openly voiced! But she did share her story with others. And verse 30 tells us that her witness was effective. People began to come to Jesus to see for themselves, even though he was a Jew! Then the story shifts back to Jesus and his disciples.

31 *Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.”*³² *But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”*³³ *So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?”*³⁴ *Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me*

and to complete his work. ³⁵Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." (John 4:31-38)

After confusing the disciples with a discussion about spiritual food, Jesus shifts to a harvest metaphor, telling them to look outward, because the fields are ripe for harvest. He is preparing them for the coming of the Samaritan townspeople, who are on their way to meet Jesus and learn about God's kingdom. And he tells them that they are to be part of harvesting the spiritual fruit that God has prepared. Contrary to the common maxim which taught that patience is required in waiting the four months for a crop to mature, this time the planting that Jesus has done and the harvest that they all will do is happening virtually at the same time.

What Jesus is doing is correcting their presbyopia. Like everyone in Israel, the disciples are focused solely on the Jewish people and God's interaction with them. But Jesus is directing them to look outward, to those Samaritans who are outside of Israel's community, because God is at work

there, too! And, because God is planning to use them to carry out some of that work. Here's what happened next.

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world." (John 4:39-42)

The disciples work with Jesus, and they reap an amazing harvest. Many Samaritans believed! God chose to work through Jesus and the disciples, addressing their presbyopia, in order to bring people to him. Samaritan people!

Let's talk a bit about our presbyopia. Mainline churches like Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and the UCC have largely lost their ability look beyond themselves and witness to the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. That is partly because for many years, peaking in the 1950's and 60's, there was cultural and societal support and even pressure for people to belong to a church in this country. The vast majority of Americans were active in churches. All a church had to do was open its doors, put out their denominational sign, and a lot of people would

show up! So, people didn't feel a need to share their faith, because the majority of their neighbors and co-workers were already active in a church! In time we lost our ability to look outward and talk about spiritual things.

Today things have changed. Fewer and fewer people are involved with any church. And younger people are even less likely to be connected to a church, and many of them have never even heard the basic stories of the Bible. That's where we are today. The harvest is out there, not in our churches. So what do we do about it?

Madeline DiRado was a 23 year-old swimmer, preparing to compete in the 2016 Olympics, her first time competing at that level, and almost certainly her last opportunity to do so. She was scheduled to compete in four events. During an interview with Yahoo!Sports, she was asked about how her faith impacts her swimming, since she was known as a devout person. "I don't think God really cares about my swimming very much," she said. "This is not my end purpose, to make the Olympic team." When asked what she thought God does care about, DiRado replied, "I think God cares about my soul and whether I'm bringing his love and mercy into the world. Can I be a loving, supportive teammate, and can I bless others around me in the same way God has been so generous with me?" A simple, outwardly-focused witness, heard by thousands of people. By the way, she ended up with a bronze, a silver, and two gold medals!

Closer to home, I was pleased to read a Letter to the Editor in the Gettysburg Times by Patti Schwartz shortly after Christmas, testifying to the positive and moving impact our drive-in Christmas Eve service had on her. She used the letter to thank everyone involved in the service, at the same time testifying to her personal faith and the ministry of this congregation.

Both of these women were simply telling the story of how they have encountered the Lord in their lives. You can do that, too! I'm going to talk more about how to do that during one of our Lenten sermons on Spiritual Disciplines. And, after Easter, I'll be offering a Zoom course called "Engage," which will deal specifically with how we can share our faith with others. I believe that addressing our presbyopia, focusing on the harvest outside our doors, and sharing our faith one-on-one is the only way forward for the Christian church in our time. So, do a little reflection on your own experience with the Lord, and be aware of opportunities that God may bring into your life for you to witness to God's goodness to you.