

March 8, 2026 Message

Catherine Brewer

Sermon “Well, This is Awkward (For the Disciples): Jesus’ Masterclass in Reconciliation in Samaria”

Last spring and summer in the Sunday school for adults, we spent much of our time watching episodes of *The Chosen*, a TV series following Jesus’ ministry. One of my favorite parts about the series is how Jesus’ disciples are given faces, backstories, and personalities. From the Bible, we have limited information about the disciples, so it is not always easy to place ourselves in their shoes as we read the stories in the New Testament. From the disciples’ characters in the series, it is easier to imagine how the disciples would interact with each other, how they would respond to what they witnessed, and how their experiences would affect their ministries in the early church. I smile when I think about how many times the disciples probably looked at each other with a helpless, exasperated expression as they follow Jesus into yet another unusual situation. I can imagine that the look says something like, “We just cannot leave this guy alone for one minute. What has he gotten us into now?”

Scholars have talked at great length about the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. I have heard the story many times and read just as many commentaries. When I was reading through the scriptures for this week, however, the part of the story that stayed with me was not the conversation at the well. My mind kept coming back to two sentences, the almost off-hand remark at the end: “So, when the Samaritans came to him [Jesus], they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words, many more became believers.” I had not really noticed this passage before. I was struck first because Jews did not stay in Samaria as invited guests of Samaritans. When Jews did have to pass through Samaria, they went swiftly and hoped for as little interaction as possible. For the first time, I considered that some of Jesus’ disciples witnessed the scene at the well, at least John, and probably Peter, Andrew, and James—this was early in Jesus’ ministry, so maybe not all 12 disciples. If Jesus stayed for two days in Samaria, that meant that those disciples also stayed for two days in Samaria. And two days can be a very long time in uncomfortable company.

We have heard before about the historical bad blood between the Jews and Samaritans. Jesus uses this animosity to make his point in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In the story of the healing of the ten lepers in Luke, the gospel writer specifies that the one who returned to thank Jesus was a Samaritan. For the benefit of his followers, Jesus expressed his surprise that the thankful one was a “foreigner”. What got me curious to look deeper was the Samaritan woman’s statement about worship in verse 20, “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” I wanted to know what she was talking about—why was she interested in the Messiah but seemed to have so little information? For how long had the feud between the Samaritans and the Jews been going? What was with Jacob’s well?

The city where our story took place, Sychar, was in (or very near) the ancient city of Shechem. Shechem was where Abram (later Abraham) built his first altar to the Lord in the land of Canaan. We read from Genesis chapter 12, “The Lord appeared to Abram at Shechem. He said, ‘I will give this land to your family who comes after you.’ So Abram built an altar there to honor the Lord, who had appeared to him.” In Genesis chapter 34, we read that Abraham’s grandson, Jacob (later Israel), lived at Shechem for some time with his wives and children. He bought land and built a well there, the very well in our story that people can still visit today. During the time of the Judges and the United Kingdom (i.e., Kings Saul, David, and Solomon), Shechem was in the middle of pleasant hill country belonging to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (the sons of Joseph). One had to walk through this region to get between Jerusalem in the south and the cities around the Sea of Galilee in the north.

The issues started with the Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. After the King Solomon died (about 931 BC), ten of the tribes rebelled against King Rehoboam, formed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and crowned Jeroboam as king instead. Ironically, the coronation happened in, you guessed it, Shechem. Later, about six miles away from Shechem, King Omri of Israel built the city of Samaria, as the new capital. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin, along with the Levites, became the Kingdom of Judah with their capital in Jerusalem. This split of kingdoms and capitals represented the first wedge between the “Jews” and the “Samaritans”.

Around the time of the founding of the city of Samaria in 879 BC, the Assyrian empire was expanding rapidly in the north, along the Tigris River.

The Assyrians had just built their new capital, Calah, between the old capital of Ashur and the major city of Nineveh. (The same Nineveh that Jonah would visit around 781 BC). By 841 BC, the Assyrians were forcing the Kingdom of Israel to pay them tribute. Over the next 100 or so years, Assyria would chip away at the territory and resolve of Israel. In about 734 BC, Tiglath-Pileser III conquered most of Israel that was not Samaria. The captured land included the areas around the Sea of Galilee. There, the conquered Israelites, mostly fishermen, farmers, and craftsman, did not rebel further and were generally left alone.

The people of Samaria, however, continued to fight back and antagonize the Assyrians. Tiglath-Pileser's successors, Shalmaneser V and Sargon II, eventually captured the city of Samaria in 722 BC. As was custom at the time, the Assyrian rules deported much of the rebellious population from the conquered regions to other parts of the Assyrian empire. In the deported people's place, the Assyrians brought in exiles from other conquered places and forced mixing among the populations. This practice of exile-and-assimilate helped prevent conquered people from regaining their cultural identity. (The Babylonians would do something like this in Judah around 597 BC, which is how Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego ended up in Nebuchadnezzar's court even before Jerusalem was destroyed.)

In the book of 2 Kings, chapter 17, we read about what happened:

The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Kuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites. They took over Samaria and lived in its towns. When they first lived there, they did not worship the Lord; so the Lord sent lions among them, and [the lions] killed some of the people... Then the king of Assyria gave this order: "Have one of the priests you took captive from Samaria go back to live there and teach the people what the god of the land requires." So, one of the priests who had been exiled from Samaria came to live in Bethel and taught them how to worship the Lord. Nevertheless, each national group made its own gods in the several towns where they settled, and set them up in the shrines the people of Samaria had made at the high places... They worshiped the Lord, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought.

The resettlement of Samaria created a hodgepodge of people, who knew about and worshipped Yahweh...sort of. To the people in the Kingdom of Judah in the 7th century BC, the religious practices and customs of the new “Samaritans” were just wrong. This was a second wedge between the Jews and the Samaritans.

A third, and more painful, wedge was yet to come. By 612 BC, 110 years after conquering Samaria, the Assyrian empire was the largest in the world, covering the area from Egypt to Turkey to Babylon. The Assyrians gave the Kingdom of Judah, one of the few unconquered holdouts, no end of headaches (which we hear about in the books of Isaiah and the other prophets). In 612 BC, something caused the Assyrian empire to collapse, and the Babylonians began taking over the region. Nebuchadnezzar II became king in 604 BC, waged war on the Kingdom of Judah, and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. Several Babylonian kings later, in 539 BC, Cyrus the Great of Persia defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus set up governors over the former Babylonian regions, including the region of the Trans-Euphrates (a.k.a. Samaria, which included the former land of Judah).

Unlike so many rulers of his time, Cyrus took a very different approach to dealing with conquered peoples. Instead of trying to assimilate and destroy cultures, Cyrus sent conquered peoples back to their homelands and helped to restore their cultures. In 539 BC, Cyrus issued an edict that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple to Yahweh with their own governor, Zerubbabel. The Jews could take back the things from the temple that the Babylonians had plundered. In addition, Cyrus would give the Jews supplies for the relocation and materials for the new temple and sacrifices. He ordered that the expenses be paid from his own revenues, specifically out of “the tributes due from the Trans-Euphrates”. This meant that the Samaritans would have to help pay for the construction and operation of the new temple in Jerusalem, but the leadership of Samaria would not be in charge.

In 538 BC, the first wave of Jews returned from exile with Zerubbabel. They traveled northwest from Babylon, up the Euphrates River to go around the desert, then turned south through Galilee, through Samaria, and into Jerusalem. In 536 BC, as the Jews were beginning construction on the temple’s foundation, the Samaritans offered to help. The response from the

Jewish leadership was less than polite. We read in the book of Ezra chapter 4 (keep in mind that this is told from the Jews' perspective):

When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." But Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us."

Not only did the Jewish leaders refuse the Samaritans' help, but they also refused to acknowledge the Samaritans' faith in God, imperfect and uninformed as that faith was. The Jews had the opportunity to bring the Samaritans back into the true worship of Yahweh. They could have helped the Samaritans relearn God's laws and reform their ways. The Jews chose not to. The Jews did not consider the Samaritans to be children of Israel "enough" even though most of the Jews at that time had adopted the same language of the region (Aramaic), used the same coins, and picked up many similarly "foreign" customs from the Babylonians and Persians. To the Jews, the Samaritans were too different to be acceptable.

The Samaritans, understandably, did not take this well. For the rest of the Persian period, the Samaritans tried to thwart the Jews' rebuilding efforts in Jerusalem. The Samaritans sent messages to each new Persian king, claiming that the Jews were planning to rebel once they were done with construction. Sometimes, the new Persian ruler would listen to the Samaritans and stop the construction. Other times, as with King Darius I, God helped the Jews and it was the Samaritans that got in trouble with the Persians. The temple in Jerusalem was finished in 516 BC. In 457 BC, Ezra returned with a second wave of Jews from exile to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Eventually, the Samaritans gave up on the Jews and Jerusalem and constructed their own temple at Mt. Gerizim (close to Sychar). The Samaritans worshiped there for more than 300 years, until a Jewish leader, the Maccabean ruler, John Hyrcanus, destroyed the temple on Mt. Gerizim in 110 BC—yet another wedge between the Jews and the Samaritans.

The wedges between the Jews and the Samaritans are reminiscent of the wedges that come into so many human relationships. There are the initial arguments and injustices, accidents and misunderstandings. The conflicts grow as people choose sides. This is followed by insults (sometimes veiled in pretend politeness and sometimes not), insinuations of bad intentions or dishonorable behaviors, and continued slights. With each new layer of aggravation, the task to rebuild the relationship gets harder. Hurt feelings, shame, and resentment get in the way. Eventually, even the motivation to try dries up. Times when interaction is required are tense. Each side is wary of the other. The best one can hope for is that the interaction is completed with as little drama as possible.

We do not have to think very long to come up with an example from within our families or local communities to envision what Jesus and his disciples were walking into in Sychar when they stopped for what was supposed to be lunch and a quick rest. The disciples had planned for Jesus to wait quietly at the well while they did the shopping. Then they would get on their way to their “real business” in Galilee and leave Samaria behind.

Waiting quietly, however, was not why Jesus was sent. He had higher priorities. Jesus’ mission was one of reconciliation, first to reconcile us with God, then to help us reconcile with each other. He knew of the faith of the Samaritans, or at least their longing for God, even if they did not know where to look. They too were God’s children that he had been sent to save. They too needed attention and instruction, law and gospel. Jesus had a lot of work to do. That work started with helping his disciples (and us) understand our current relationship with God compared to what God intended, then demonstrating the process of reconciliation. So, Jesus took the disciples into the midst of their rivals and showed them what relationship restoration looks like.

First, Jesus started the conversation. He reached out rather than wait for the Samaritans to make a move. Jesus did the same thing for us. By Jesus’ time, there were plenty of wedges between humans and God. One part of the lectionary for this week that we did not read was the story of the Israelites complaining against God in the desert. God had provided manna and quail for food, yet the Israelites were ready to stone Moses over the water situation. Our meditation before worship today captures God’s response. The Old Testament is filled with stories of the Israelites turning away from God to seek help from idols. Humans were in no condition to

address the problem on their own. As we read from Paul's letter to the Romans:

When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Second, Jesus showed his willingness to be present. Just as he came to live among humans, Jesus spent time with the Samaritans in their homes and in their community—on their turf. Third, Jesus did not pretend that everything was okay. He acknowledged the sticking points, using the social difficulties to broach the bigger spiritual issues. Finally, Jesus focused on what God intends—a path forward. Listen again from our reading:

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

I can only imagine how awkward those two days must have been for the disciples. Chances are good that the disciples stayed in the homes of the Samaritans—homes that probably contained things that Jews were supposed to avoid as “unclean” or at least things that were unfamiliar. The Samaritans probably said or did things that irked the disciples (and several of Jesus' disciples were not known for their patient tempers or diplomatic manners). I can just see the disciples wanting to stand up and storm off, then getting a look from Jesus, and sitting back down with clenched teeth as polite smiles.

As Christians, we sometimes like to think of ourselves in the same way that Jesus' Jewish disciples thought of themselves: members of God's chosen people, people who know how to worship and serve God “properly”, and therefore, who are more deserving of God's blessings. What we see in Jesus' teachings and actions is that, up against God's expectations for us, we are much more like the Samaritans, with long histories of animosity towards God and His will.

In our reading from John, we are told that many of the Samaritans came to faith during Jesus' visit. We are not told if anything changed in the hearts of the disciples. There is another passage later in the New Testament, from Acts chapter 8, that makes me wonder though. After the stoning of Stephen, the early church was persecuted by Saul and the believers scattered into the wider region of Judea, sharing the Gospel as they went. Phillip ended up in Samaria, where his message and healing miracles were well received. We hear more of the story, starting at verse 14:

The apostles in Jerusalem heard that people in Samaria had accepted God's word. So they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived there, [Peter and John] prayed for the new believers. They prayed that they would receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them. And they received the Holy Spirit...

Peter and John continued to preach the word of the Lord and tell people about Jesus. Then they returned to Jerusalem. On the way they preached the good news in many villages in Samaria.

Why did the church in Jerusalem send Peter and John? Why did the writer of the book of Acts make note of the time difference between the Samaritans' baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit? We are not told which town in Samaria this was. Part of me wonders if the town was Sychar and if Peter and John were sent because they had been there before with Jesus. Part of me wonders if the timing of Holy Spirit at the hands of Peter and John was intentional, showing the next stage of Jesus' work of reconciliation in the hearts of those disciples. We do not know. Knowing the strange ways in which God works, however, I would not be surprised.

As we try to follow Jesus on our journeys through Lent, I encourage us to consider the cities of Sychar in our own lives. What are the places that we must visit to get between points A and B that we do not want to stay any longer than we need to? Who are the Samaritans to us? What wedges are there that get in the way of us having healthy relationships? Which wedges did we put there? What have others done that we have allowed to become wedges?

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells the crowd (Matthew 24:23-24), "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."

God calls us to live lives of reconciliation, showing His love to the world through our example. This task is difficult and can feel impossible against the months and years of strained relationships. During these times, we need to lean on Jesus. He reconciled us to God, restoring our most important relationship and enabling a change in our hearts. Through God's Word and the help of the Holy Spirit, we can learn from and follow Jesus' example.

Amen. Let us pray.