

Lent Midweek 2021
“Giving Up Superiority”
John 4:5-42
St. John’s Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
March 10, 2021

Pastor Patti and I are preaching on “Giving it Up,” this Lent. The first week was “Giving up Control,” last week was “Giving up Expectations,” and today we’re focusing specifically on “Giving up Superiority.”

It’s way too easy these days to be “puffed up.” Paul uses that phrase “puffed up” to describe that false sense of superiority we get when we assume we are at the center of everything. There, in that bubble of superiority, we think we are without bias. We think we are truly the objective ones. We think our knowledge is what counts, our wisdom is what matters, and our judgments are flawless and final. I think we’ve really seen the world puffed up with itself lately, during the pandemic. It’s too easy to stay safe and isolated behind our computer screens, pronouncing final judgment on everything, demonizing groups of people, canceling people who think differently than we do. It’s way too easy to stay in a bubble of false superiority, when there’s no one right there to directly challenge us and question us and remind us that we’re not final. No one should know that better than believers. The Word of God is right here with us, confronting us, reminding us: we’re not at the center. Our knowledge, our wisdom, our judgment is not what counts. Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, is at the center. He alone is superior. He alone is final. We will always be completely dependent upon

him to have any life or any future. As a believer, I can't even know my value or make a judgment without referring to him.

So let's talk about what Jesus does with his true superiority. In his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John chapter 4 (our reading for today), he has every opportunity to act puffed up. Of all human beings who've ever lived, Jesus is the only one who has power to pronounce final judgment. Now if you or I were sitting by that well that day and that particular woman came near, the truth is we probably wouldn't even talk with her. Have you ever shocked someone at Walmart by expressing an interest in them? Well, you see how the woman is shocked when Jesus speaks to her. Jesus is breaking through a social barrier. Men and women weren't supposed to speak to each other when they were alone like that. There's a social expectation there that, right off the bat, should have kept Jesus and the woman separated in their own bubbles. Just by the fact that he initiates a conversation with her, he's bridging a gap, he's making a living connection with her, where were expected to remain separated, in their own worlds. So Jesus is not going to stay in his bubble here; he's not going to hang on to his innate superiority here—he's wanting to enter into this woman's life, and bring her into his life. being

But then we come to a deeper wall of separation: a moral separation. In a very blunt way, Jesus exposes the woman's deepest shame...a brokenness that has shaped her life and all her relationships. He just puts it out there: "You've had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." It's kind of brutal, the way he does it! But you notice, he doesn't attach any judgment to it. It's a truth statement. She's broken, and just imagine how everyone in the village looks at her. She's a perfect target; they

can say “I’m messed up, but at least I’m not her.” Her shame helps everyone stay in their superiority bubbles. They relegated her to “not worth it” status long ago. They have put her—and she keeps herself—in a permanent shame bubble. She will always be in that position of moral inferiority—in her own eyes as well as other people’s. Jesus exposes the wound, the broken relationships, at the center of her life. In moral terms, in front of Jesus the final judge, she is like a moth in front of the consuming fire. But with all his moral perfection, with all his power to close her off and cancel her and relegate her to “not worth it” status, we see instead that Jesus looks at this woman and he sees his own sister. He exposes her wound, but **not for judgment**. He makes the connection with her, and brings all the hurt out into the light of day so that healing, and a new conversation with God can start happening.

But there’s one more wall of separation. This woman is a Samaritan, and as John reminds us, “Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans.” The Samaritans, by the time Jesus came, had nothing to do with Jerusalem or with temple-based Judaism. And you see, this religious difference is the last thing the woman tries to use to keep herself in her own protective bubble. “Wait a second—our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you’re a Jew: you say people need to worship at the temple in Jerusalem.” So you stay in your bubble and I’ll stay in mine, OK? It sounds familiar. This is what a lot of Christians are saying today. “You’ve got your beliefs, I’ve got mine, so let’s be open-minded and let’s make our separate bubbles final for ourselves. In other words, let’s not have a conversation about Jesus at all. So it’s not about Jesus himself anymore—it’s about my personal belief, my personal religion. My bubble. You know, we might think we’re being open-minded when we stop talking about Jesus, but what we’re really doing is putting ourselves at the center of our own bubble.

How can we do that? We are not final; **Jesus** is final. And we see Jesus modeling what God wants US to do in John chapter 4. One person at a time, he wants us to let go and come out of our self-protective bubbles. Following Jesus' example with the woman, he wants us to break through the walls of division and start a real conversation with people who do not know him. He makes it possible for all people can worship the Father in spirit and truth. Ever since Pentecost, true worship—true life—is no longer centered in the temples we build. True worship not going to be bound by our ethnic or racial or denominational identities: it's now centered in the person of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit, working through Jesus, is bringing people of every time, language, race and nation to worship the Holy Trinity. There's no room for religious barriers when it comes to Jesus—he himself is going to cut through all of them. We can't build ourselves up as if we're superior behind those old religious walls anymore. Jesus has become the center.

In John 4, not only do we see the only superior person who ever lived refusing to be superior. We can also see ourselves in the woman, who's trying to stay in her bubble, even though she's unhappy there. It's a shabby life where her boyfriend is using her and everyone makes jokes about her behind her back. But at least she can make believe it's her existence. Isn't it interesting how holding onto a sense of inferiority and perpetual shame can so easily become another bubble where we claim finality for ourselves? Here I am, and here I will stay. I'm broken and miserable. But this is my thing. Stay out of my thing. It's like, keeping ourselves beneath everyone else is pretty much the same as keeping ourselves above everyone else. It's another way of trying to make ourselves final. It's just another way of trying to control our own lives. But Jesus

persisted with the woman, who tried to keep herself in that bubble. He showed relentless, fearless, true love, and he called her out of that isolation into a conversation, a connection, with him.

We believers are all working with a different hand when it comes to our backgrounds, our histories, our circumstances. We could waste our time trying to sit in judgment regarding the different hands we've been dealt. But then we would be prisons for ourselves and for other people from which Jesus has already freed us. As believers we've got nothing to build up anymore except him. Nothing we're going to do with our cards in this life is final, we ourselves are certainly never going to be final. In our eternal future with Jesus, we're going to be completely dependent upon him for every moment of life we have. If that's our final reality, where in this dying world is there room for any sense of personal superiority? In view of our future with Jesus, what hill of beans does our wisdom amount to? Our intelligence, our achievements? Nothing, unless it all goes to his glory right now. Praise God, in Jesus Christ we can let go of our sense of superiority...the delusion that we can ever be final. In Jesus, we can even praise God when we crash and burn. Praise God for reminding us we're not final. Praise God, in Christ even our failures and our foolishness can be transformed into a positive witness to our savior. The Samaritan woman had for years been silent, isolated, driven by shame. After Jesus put aside every last bit of his divine, absolute, final superiority and made a connection with her in her pain and darkness, she was no longer in that final bubble she and other people had relegated her to. She broke right out of that old bubble of fear and death and shame; she started speaking. She introduced her whole town to Jesus. So let's ask ourselves what or who we're afraid of in this world. What's keeping us in our bubbles? What can we do, now that Jesus has broken us out?