

## **The Awakened Traveler: The Encounter**

### **John 4:7-40**

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How would you define the difference between a tourist and a traveler? Are they synonymous or are there subtle differences? When I asked myself, I had a hunch about this but checked out the internet to see what others thought. A quick glance at Merriam-Webster reveals little distinction between the two. However, in common usage, people seem to use tourist for those who mostly sightsee, easily identified by their cameras or binoculars, and traveler for those who seek to engage in some authentic way with the people who live there.

If we go with those definitions, I can say I have been incredibly fortunate in my life to have a lot of experiences as both a tourist and a traveler. As a tourist, I have visited nearly all fifty states and seen the tremendous beauty of many of our national parks. I have been to the Eiffel Tower and the tulip fields of Holland, the Taj Mahal and Times Square, the wailing wall in Jerusalem and the safari parks of Kenya. As a traveler, I have eaten a meal in the tiny home of a family friend in India as the mice ran around the ceiling rafters. I've worshiped and preached in a Kenyan Methodist Church and eaten mango straight from the tree at the home of one of the students from the Bishop Lawi Imathiu Secondary School. I've heard the stories of a Palestinian Christian about what it means to live in the never-ending battle zone between Israel and Palestine. I've played kickball and made crafts with beautiful children in Guatemala.

All of these experiences have been amazing, but those which have been truly transformative are the ones that have brought me face to face with a person whose language, culture, or religion are different from my own. This summer, in our Awakened Traveler sermon series, we are exploring how God uses our experiences with new people in new places and new circumstances to help us grow in empathy, compassion, and global understanding. Nearly always, that happens through an authentic encounter with a stranger who becomes a friend. When it does, we become bearers of peace into our embattled world.

That said, for many of us, engaging with someone very different from ourselves can be challenging or uncomfortable. Of course, for the three years of his ministry, Jesus was a traveler, and he did not shy away from connection with the people he met on his journey - even those he might have avoided. In fact, he sought them out. Perhaps we can learn something from one of his encounters with a stranger.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well begins with him resting from his travels. He is alone because the disciples have gone to get food. A Samaritan woman comes to the well in the middle of the day to draw water, and Jesus asks her for a drink.

According to all the social norms and expectations of the time, he should never have talked to her. First of all, the fact that she comes to the well at noon and alone suggests that she may have been ostracized by her community. Normally, the women of a village would go together to draw water at the beginning of the day. The trip to the well was a social time for neighborly conversation. We later learn that this woman has had five husbands and is living with

a man she isn't married to. In a culture where women's value is based on marriage and child-rearing, she would have been shunned.

Secondly, she is a Samaritan and, as the text tells us, Jews and Samaritans didn't mix. The Jews saw the Samaritans as unclean and unworthy. Finally, she is a woman and, according to the social rules of the day, no man should have engaged with her.

Yet, true to his nature, Jesus does just that. So, what does Jesus do to turn what could be an incredibly awkward situation into one in which two people feel safe to engage with each other and share a bit of their lives?

First of all, as commentator Karoline Lewis points out, he begins a conversation - a real conversation that invites authentic relationship. Jesus opens his conversation with the Samaritan woman by acknowledging his own vulnerability. He is hot and thirsty but hasn't got a bucket. When he asks her for a drink, immediately some of the invisible walls between them begin to come down because he shows that he is willing to set aside his power and privilege to ask for her help.

This then sets the stage for her to name the differences between them in social standing and invite him into further conversation by asking him a question. The conversation then unfolds as each approaches the other with curiosity and openness. They quickly move from talking about water literally to the discussion of living water, which leaves us to ponder what living water actually is. Could it be the love and acceptance of Christ that dissolves difference and creates true relationship?

What is interesting is that later in the conversation, after she has become more comfortable with him, she again names the difference between them, but this time she speaks only to the difference between their peoples not to their differences as individuals.

Ironically, Samaritans and Jews were actually very similar. They both claimed Abraham as their father and Moses as the one who led them out of captivity in Egypt. They both worshiped the same God. They both understood themselves to be children of Israel. The primary difference was in where they worship. Jews believed that you worship God in Jerusalem. The Samaritans believed you could worship God elsewhere including on a mountain top.

You can almost see the smile play across Jesus's face at what an insignificant difference this is. He then goes on to say that the time is coming when people will understand that whether we worship in Jerusalem or on a mountain top doesn't matter. What is important is that we worship in spirit and truth.

So, Jesus has thoughtfully, and skillfully, steered the conversation away from differences to similarities and introduces a vision of a shared future. But the encounter doesn't stop there. It moves from the individual level of Jesus and the woman to the meeting of their two communities as the woman goes to tell others in her village about this kind, wise, and compassionate man. Meanwhile, Jesus prepares his disciples to go with him into the village and extend the hand of mutual relationship to the other villagers, as well.

Finally, Jesus recognizes that relationship-building takes time. Initially, he invests that time in an unusually lengthy conversation with the woman. Then, once he has entered the village, he stays there for a full two days, making time and space for the relationships to grow.

Of course, all of this provides insight for us into how we as travelers might move beyond superficial encounters with the people we meet to relationships that are transformative. As with Jesus and the Samaritan woman, it begins with conversation. As Karoline Lewis writes in her commentary on this passage, “We are living in a time when conversation needs to be cultivated and valued. Practiced and pursued. Longed for and lived. Without real conversation, we lack intimacy and understanding; connection and empathy. Without real conversation, we risk detachment and distance.”

I’d like to suggest that this is true not just for us as individuals but as a church, as well. The most impactful work we have done outside of the United States has happened through building relationships. Whether you look at how we have come to know the people of Meru, Kenya through returning year after year or the time different members of our church have spent with the children at the orphanage we have helped to build in Costa Rica, both we and the people we meet experience transformation when we speak with each other and share our lives.

Of course, we do some of this within our community, as well. Yet, I think there is much more we could be doing. During this time when we see so much friction and fighting between individuals, groups, and political parties, what would it look like for us to spend time in our community with the mindset of a traveler - intentionally open to getting to know and building relationships with people different from ourselves. How can we individually or collectively get to know the people who are strangers to us right here in our own town or county? Rather than waiting for them to come to us, how might we go outside our walls and seek out encounters with strangers just as Jesus did? What if we were to start an encounter ministry - a ministry which focused on connecting with people we don’t know, we’re uncomfortable with, or we disagree with?

Many of us feel very frustrated by everything that is happening in our country right now but also feel powerless to do anything about it. Yet, I believe that the church can lead our nation in being an example of overcoming differences, building relationships, and conversation that is mutually respectful.

Of course, we are the church. We can catalyze the change we want to see. It begins with travel. Stepping outside our doors, outside our comfort zone, with an open mind and open heart, ready to turn strangers into friends.

May it be so. Amen.