

June 30th: [well]

As I mentioned during the announcements, we have begun a new journey together—our summer sermon series titled “Dis[place]d: Finding Home Together.” This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, so that we might find comfort in God’s promise of a future home.

When Pastor Heather introduced this topic, she defined this concept of displacement for us, saying that to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and this can apply to both tangible things like individuals and intangible things like emotions. Displacement can be temporary or permanent, but often the same underlying feelings apply to this sense of disorientation and confusion. When in displacement, we might feel adrift or lost, or perhaps anxious and afraid, or maybe insecure or bitter. We might have lost sight of the people, places, or objects that make us feel safe and at home, so we feel a deep sense of vulnerability. This month, we’re focusing on stories of involuntary displacement—so examples from our biblical story where displacement and disorientation is outside of human control.

So if you are with us this morning and identify with any of those feelings, or are going through an experience of displacement in your life, we invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God’s presence and the peace that is waiting for you in this place.

Before we get started, I invite you to pray with me.

God of Living Water, you encounter us at the crossroads of our lives, and you greet each of us as friends. No matter where we are in our journey this morning, draw close to us, and speak to us with tenderness and care. Say the things our souls long to hear, and send us onto the next path with strength and courage. Be with us now, in all of our brokenness, we pray. Amen.

I was lucky enough to come of age during a major renaissance of teen movies—the late 90s and early 2000s was a heyday of the high school drama, and the movie *Mean Girls* came out towards the end of my freshman year. If you haven't seen it, it's about a teenage girl named Cady whose family moves from Africa to the midwest—and after years of being homeschooled Cady must learn the social dynamics of a large, complicated high school setting.

I saw it more than once in theaters, and then at almost every sleepover for the next year, because all my friends were as obsessed with it as I was. And it wasn't just the snappy writing, or the comedic genius of Tina Fey and Amy Poehler—*Mean Girls* touched on a theme that I think all of my classmates and I were wrestling with at that point—we all felt like there was so much pressure to be popular (whatever that means) or to “fit in” with the right crowd. Like in the movie, our lives seemed to be full of spoken and unspoken cultural expectations—expectations to wear the right kind of outfit, to listen to the right kind of music, to attend the right kind of parties—and that might sound silly, but all of us were desperate for that feeling of acceptance.

I think the reason that *Mean Girls* was so iconic, or at least iconic enough to get a 2024 reboot, is that this experience of searching for acceptance is more than just a high school phenomenon. I think if we were to be honest with ourselves, this desire to fit in and be valued is something that we deal with our whole lives—we don't outgrow our desire to be part of the group, we don't outgrow this need to be seen for who we are and valued for what we bring to the table.

All of us, no matter our age, want to be accepted for who we are, don't we?

This might come up when we start a career and try to make new friends in the office, or when we have children and try to meet other parents to hang out with, or when we join a new activity or club. We might feel the pressure to fit in when we move to a new place, or when our family expands, or when we check out a new church for the first time.

Because like high school, adult life places can be difficult to navigate. Each event, activity or community has different cultures, different expectations, and different norms. And if we're unfamiliar or new to that place, it can be nerve-wracking to figure all of this out, right?

If any of that resonates with you, I'm glad you're here today, because through this passage, we'll be talking about a specific kind of disorienting experience—something that I'm going to call “social displacement.” Through the lens of this ancient story, we'll be taking a closer look at how displacement can be something that happens between individuals, or between an individual and their social environment. So when I use this term “social displacement,” I mean an experience of being isolated or marginalized from your greater community, but it can also refer to a situation where you might feel out of place or unsure how you fit in. Some theologians and sociologists use this term differently, but if you're interested in diving deeper into what I'll be sharing on this topic, I'll share some links in our weekly newsletter.

Our scripture today comes from what we call the New Testament, specifically the Gospel of John. In this narrative, we meet the adult Jesus, who has now embarked upon his season of itinerant ministry. He's in his 30s, and he begins to travel the countryside with his band of disciples, stopping along the way in various towns and cities to preach, teach, and heal anyone who will listen.

The early verses of this passage give us a little geographical and cultural context—our gospel author writes, “Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John— 2 although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. 3 So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. 4 Now he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.”

This might not mean a lot of our modern ears, but these simple statements would have been quite telling for the original ancient audience.

To most people who lived in Judea, Samaria conjured up all kinds of bad memories and negative connotations. When the land of their ancestors was carved up into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, some of the northern kings adopted practices and religious rituals that were considered idolatrous at worst and unorthodox at best—and so after the return from the Babylonian exile, many of the residents of Judah saw their remaining northern neighbors as no longer part of God’s family. Some Samaritans still believed in the God of their common ancestors, but because they were so far from the temple in Jerusalem, they rarely participated in the festivals and traditions that were common to residents of Judea.

Over the course of centuries, this separation widened, and the gap between Judea and Samaria became more and more pronounced. By the first century, these two people groups developed different cultures, different tribal identities, and an increasingly strained relationship. Many Jews of Judea at this time saw Samaritans as foreigners, and actively treated them with hostility. So when Jesus and his friends decide to journey through Samaria, they do so with the knowledge that their journey could bring them into contact with people and places where they might find conflict or a lack of hospitality. They knew that they might encounter people and places where they might not be welcome.

But those expectations are turned on their head when Jesus and his disciples reach their chosen place to rest: a local well. In the heat of the day, something interesting happens. Starting in verse 7, our text says this: “When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)”

Already we can see that this is a unique conversation—one that is breaking with the expected norms of Jesus’ day. If it was commonly accepted as a cultural norm that Jews and Samaritans were not supposed to associate with

each other, then Jesus' request for hospitality at this well goes against all kinds of societal expectations. If these two groups were not supposed to mix or mingle, this simple conversation could result in social consequences for both of them. The woman at the well seems to understand these barriers, but Jesus seems to disregard the dynamics that are supposed to govern their relationship. He's apparently not interested in fitting in with the prescribed rules of his community.

But there's another layer to this story that I think is pretty profound. As Jesus and the Samaritan woman continue their conversation, we hear this exchange starting in verse 16: "He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." 17 "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

I think this is where we really start to see this idea of social displacement in this story—and I think these simple statements by the unnamed Samaritan woman and Jesus clue us into the fact that this ancient world was not so different from our own when it comes to societal norms and pressure to fit in.

Although we do not hear the specific details of this woman's story or what led her to this series of husbands, it sounds like she's been through some difficult life circumstances. In a world where women were defined by their marital status or relationship to men, her reputation and standing within her community would have risen and fallen with each of these unions. Her ability to fit in with her larger tribe and family would have depended upon her willingness to conform to these social conventions and cultural expectations—and any deviations from these societal rules could have left her open to poverty or exploitation or being an outcast.

In her conversation with Jesus, he points that the man she is with now is not her husband—and Jesus doesn't say this in a judgemental way, but as an observation that this woman might not be in a stable or acceptable situation as defined by her larger community. It's likely that this uncertain position,

whether it's with a partner, relative, or friend, has marginalized her in some way, leaving her on the fringes of her culture, without a lot of support or compassion. In a high school lunchroom, she might have been the person eating alone, or the kid picked last for kickball during recess. In our modern world, she might be the woman estranged from her family, or the only neighbor without kids in a neighborhood of young couples.

In a lot of ways, she's in between—between husbands, between social groups, between feeling in and feeling left out. And now she's associating with a Jew from Judea, which is exactly the opposite thing to do if she is trying to fit in with the social norms of her day.

This is the person that Jesus decides is the one to hear this good news about living water. This woman, a Samaritan, outside of the bounds of Jewish society, and outside of the normal social structure of her own community, is the one who understands the truth about Jesus in a deep and profound way. She responds to his invitation almost immediately, and after this encounter she goes into her village and tells her entire clan about Jesus. Despite her in-between status, her testimony is powerful and her witness spreads far and wide.

Here's why I think this story can be a source of hope for us as we navigate our own social displacements—whatever that looks like for each of us.

If you find yourself on the margins, or if you feel like you don't quite fit in—Jesus will meet you there.

If you feel like you're on the fringes, or if you feel like you're struggling with cultural expectations—Jesus will find you there.

If you feel like societal pressures are too much right now, or if you feel like you desperately need someone to see you and value you as you are—Jesus will be there.

If you're between relationships, or between friend groups, or between support systems—Jesus is ready to encounter you in this liminal, uncertain space.

If you're feeling lonely, or isolated, or lost, or disconnected, or displaced—Jesus is ready to greet you as a friend, he is ready to speak to you without judgment or condemnation.

If you're looking for the acceptance you've been longing for—Jesus has that acceptance and more to share with you.

Jesus has living water for you—and Jesus is offering you that living water in whatever moment you find yourself in today. The eternal life that Jesus is ready to welcome us into is a life where we never are left out, never forgotten, and never rejected. The eternal life of Jesus means never feeling less than, or having to conform, or failing to meet expectations.

Eternal life with Jesus means that we are loved just as we are.

Amen.