

“WHERE DO WE WORSHIP GOD?”

John 4:16-26

Eighteen years ago my wife Becky and I were involved with a group who started a new congregation. The principle conversation of the original planning committee had to do with where this new congregation would worship. Most of the group had left a congregation which had a very nice worship space, complete with stain glass windows, pipe organ and a grand piano, padded pews, a designated choir “loft” (as it was called when I was a child) and a high vaulted ceiling. As the new congregation began to think about worshipping together, we discovered we had nothing. We needed to find a place to meet and were able to secure the cafeteria at a local Mennonite high school for our meeting space. A group of us every Sunday went early to remove the tables and set up chairs in rows, and then reverse that process after the worship. We quickly realized we needed something to sing out of, and had nothing. My wife learned of a congregation in the district which had purchased the blue Brethren hymnals, but were not using them after a change in pastoral leadership who brought changes to the style of music. The hymnals were boxed and stored in a closet. We were able to rent them. We used a cafeteria table covered with a cloth at the front of the worship area for our “*communion table*.” The brass cross and brass offering plates we used were donated by Claude Simmons’ farther who had them stored in a closet at his home. The candles came from another source. It was eye-opening to discover how many things we had taken for granted we now needed to find. For the first three years, this new congregation met in a room which was a school cafeteria the rest of the week—with a low flat ceiling and no raised chancel area. We sat on cafeteria chairs, used an upright piano and a make-shift altar area.

This new congregation had to address the question, “*Where will we worship God?*” While, admittedly, the context is different, this is the same question raised in the scripture we heard a few moments ago. In the fourth chapter of John’s gospel, we find the story of the woman at the well. Here we find Jesus and his disciples traveling from Galilee in the north to Judea in the south. The shortest route would be to travel through Samaria, the territory in-between those

two destinations. The problem was that although the Jews and Samaritans shared some ancestral commonality, the two peoples felt animosity towards one another. The Jews felt the Samaritans were not pure enough because they had intermarried with foreigners. While many Jews in traveling between Galilee and Jerusalem would avoid the Samaritans by traveling east of the Jordan River—taking a longer route in order to avoid these hated persons—Jesus and his disciples would take the shorter route by traveling through Samaria.

Our biblical story recounts a time Jesus and his disciples are traveling through Samaria and come near the village of Sychar. In this area there is a well which tradition suggests had been dug by Jacob, an ancestor of both groups. Hot and tired from his travels, Jesus sits down by the well while his disciples go into town, presumably to purchase provisions. About noon a woman from the nearby village comes to draw water. Being thirsty, Jesus asks the woman for a drink. The woman expresses surprise that he, a Jew, would ask a favor from her, a Samaritan. The two engage in an interesting conversation about water, living water, something needed to draw the water, and never experiencing thirst again. But all of that is the subject of another sermon. Then Jesus asks the woman to go get her husband. The woman answers that she does not have a husband. Jesus' reply suggests he is aware of that fact, and additionally that she has been married five times and that the man with whom she is currently living is not her husband.

Then an interesting shift occurs in their conversation. We are not sure why the Samaritan woman changes the subject. It might be that the conversation with Jesus had become too personal in focusing on her loose morality. Or possibly the woman is genuinely impressed that Jesus has demonstrated characteristics of being a prophet—including having information about her personal life—and desires an answer to a long debated controversy between the two peoples. The issue has to do with the correct place to worship God. The Samaritan woman notes that the Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place to worship God. On the other hand, since the Samaritans do not have easy access to the Holy City, they have built a temple on Mt. Gerizim, which is visible from Jacob's well. The Samaritans have good reason to be proud of Mt. Gerizim. Both Abraham and Jacob had built altars there. The book of Deuteronomy (11:29)

records that God instructed the Israelite people to go to Mt. Gerizim after crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land to recite the blessings and curses of the covenant. Both the Jews and Samaritans argue it is at their respective sacred places that God is to be worshiped. The Samaritan woman asks Jesus about the correct place to worship—is it on Mt. Zion, site of the temple in Jerusalem, or on Mt. Gerizim?

Before the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren made the decision to build their big beautiful facility on the hill, I was asked to speak at a retreat of their leaders. The subject I was asked to address was, *“What is the spiritual basis of church buildings.”* I found this a fascinating topic. I tried to find some specific biblical text in which God instructs God’s people to construct places of worship. If such passages exist, I could not find them. Certainly neither Jesus nor Paul said anything about the need to have a building. Then I came to the conclusion that the question has to do with the relationship between the physical and spiritual. How do persons who have physical bodies and live in a physical world give attention to God who is spiritual, most often doing so by worshiping in a physical structure?

As I explored that question, I came to the realization that God’s people have used physical objects as aids for worship. Several of the early patriarchs built altars for worship, including making animal sacrifices. Even while God’s people were nomadic—wandering in the wilderness—they built what was called the *“ark of the covenant.”* The ark simply was a wooden box in which their sacred scriptures were kept. On the top was placed a throne where it was believed God resided. This special box had handles or poles so it could be carried wherever the Israelites went, including into battle. Again, we see an effort for God’s people to identify God with a specific physical place.

When these nomadic people finally settled in the Promised Land, they built places of worship. Many local communities had a synagogue where the people would go for worship and study. To this day Jewish synagogues have a Holy Ark where the rolls of sacred scripture are kept. A temple was built in Jerusalem. In fact, over the generations several were built after the

previous one was destroyed. It was believed God resided there in the “*Holy of Holies*,” an inner sanctum where only the most devout could go. It was expected that every good male Jew who lived within 30 miles would make an annual pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. Having this physical place—including the symbols to which I referred in the children’s story—are physical aids for our worship of the spiritual God.

The Samaritan woman asks Jesus where God is to be worshiped, here on Mt. Gerizim or on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem? Jesus answers by suggesting she is not asking the right question. The physical place is not the important issue. Jesus goes on to point to the critical qualities of worship which are not limited to a geographical location. Jesus says to the woman, “*The time is coming and is now here when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth... For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.*” What Jesus is suggesting to the Samaritan woman is that **of more importance than *where* we worship is the *object of our worship (that is, the spirit) and nature of our worship (that is, the truth).***

Katie Givens Kime (Day 1, March 1, 2020) relates her appreciation for persons who are in 12 Step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous. She tells of accompanying a parishioner to a 12 Step meeting, a woman she calls Latrice. Latrice introduces herself in the typical manner, “*Hi. My name is Latrice and I’m an alcoholic.*” She reports that she has been sober for 50 days and has been talking to her sponsor a lot about Step #2. A large posted on the wall behind Latrice reminds the group that Step #1 is for an addict to admit they are powerless over their addiction. Step #2 is a belief in a power greater than themselves. This Higher Power is loosely defined and for some may not be a traditional concept of God. In addressing the group, Latrice goes on, “*I need to announce that my Higher Power is this group.*” Reassuring “*mmms*” and “*okays*” filled the room. She continues, “*I’m having trouble with this God-thing. I know that I am not God, and that the booze is not God, and that my work is not God. Understanding that, I think is helping. So, y’all, I guess this group is my Higher Power.*”

Pastor Kime looks at the floor and tries not to frown too obviously. The next day Pastor Kime calls a pastor colleague who knows a lot more about recovery than she. Pastor Kime tells of her horror about what she had witnessed. She explains, *“I mean, this poor woman, if her god is the group, then...is she supposed to pray to a group? This 12 step model seems like it helps a lot of people, but...”* Her colleague laughs and interrupts her to say, *“So I guess you haven’t heard the doorknob thing!”* *“No, what is the doorknob thing?”* The colleague explains, *“There is an old 12 step saying, ‘You can have even that doorknob be your god, it just can’t be you!’”* *“What!?”* Pastor Kime exclaims, *“That’s even worse!”* The friend goes on, *“Well, think about it this way: The best thing about having a doorknob as your god is that it is probably the first god you’ve ever had that wasn’t trying to kill you.”*

Indeed, the reality for all of us is the temptation to substitute many lesser things—be that drugs which make us feel better, satisfying our personal pleasures, material possessions, family and friends, fame and fortune—for our commitment to a Supreme Being. **It really does not matter *where* we worship. What is important is that we worship the Spiritual One who is greater than we and in whom we find truth.**

J. D. Glick

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