

Gathering the Harvest

[John 4:34-38](#)

Commitment Sunday

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

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Pastors always struggle with what to say on Commitment Sunday. A friend of mine, John Galloway, a pastor in Wayne, Pennsylvania, came up with the best solution. He discovered a pattern that could raise the budget in one day: make your commitment today to reach into your neighbor's pocket or purse, take out all the money, and give it.

Randy Alcorn said in his book, "Money, Possessions and Eternity," that a "steward's primary goal is to be found faithful by his master to use the resources that he or she has to accomplish the task or the purpose that the master has." To give our time, our money, our food, our energy, our creativity to do what Jesus would do in this world. To give of our possessions, our places of power, our status, our estates, our homes, our education, to do what Jesus would do in this world. To give of our vocations, our abilities, our relationships, and our intelligence to do what Jesus would do in this world.

We are committing ourselves to the purpose of the ministry of Jesus Christ when we give of ourselves and our gifts. We are committing ourselves to the pattern that Jesus lived out when we give of ourselves and our gifts. So what is that pattern and purpose that Jesus so clearly demonstrated? What is it that moves us to put our money where our hearts are? In John, chapter four, we see the primary example of how Jesus would have us invest; the invitation and command to participate in reaping the harvest.

Jesus is traveling from Judea to Galilee. There are two major roads to take. One is the low road through the Jordan Valley, and the other is the high road up through Sumeria. Jesus chooses to take the high road, which is the road that others typically do not travel because it goes through the country that is considered traitorous to Israel. The northern kingdom did not stay with the southern kingdom. The colonists from Babylon and Assyria gathered in this area, and so there's intermarriage and people from all over the world have come, mostly pagan connections. There's a mixed view of how these people interfaced with the Syrian occupation, a hundred and fifty years earlier than Jesus when the Maccabeans gathered to rebel against the Syrians. There's still hot, angry blood about the fact that the Samaritans joined the Syrians to wipe out the Israelites. These people reject the pattern of Old Testament prophets, they reject most of the Old Testament that existed for the people of God. They had a different mosaic Pentateuch. They called themselves children of Abraham but they were surely not well connected.

Today's equivalents may be people who have some connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but are significantly off-track from us: people who have a Jewish heritage or are Muslim. People who are Mormon. People who have some connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but we would consider them not connected to good Presbyterian, Christian patterns of life. They are the unchurched. They are the people who are divorced and broken, relationally and emotionally poor. The lonely, the isolated, the lost. These are people who are very spiritual, but they are not religious. And we are surrounded by literally millions of them in our culture. They seek, they hunger, they thirst. They search. But they do not necessarily buy into the traditional Christian patterns of life. The current day Samaritans are all around us. They may be, in fact, not like the Galileans who may be somewhat like the independent Baptist Bible church people, or the mainliners of Jerusalem who have kept the faith for years and years. They are the people who are lost in the cracks, and most researchers think it's 50 to 75 percent of America that is increasingly disconnected to the Judeo-Christian faith. There are more pagans outside these doors, in this country of first world prominence, than in many third world countries today.

Where is the mission of Jesus Christ? It's right here. Who are the missionaries of Jesus Christ? We are. We are now in the pattern of what Loren Mead described in *The Once and Future Church*, "The mission is at the doorstep, and the people who need to know God are the ones we run into on a day-to-day basis in everyday American life."

Now Jesus went out of his way, cutting through resistance and bias, to connect with this Samaritan woman at the well. It was not a positive thing in those days for a man to go out of his way to talk with a woman. Here's what rabbis of Jesus' day said, "It is forbidden for a man to give a greeting to a woman in public at all." "A man shall not be alone with a woman at an inn, not even with his sister or his daughter, on account of what other men may think." "A man shall not talk with a woman in the street, not even his own wife, and especially not another woman, on account of what men may say."

Earl Palmer puts this in a little different perspective when he talks about the impact of gnosticism at the time that John wrote the Gospel. The Gnostic gospels have re-emerged today in a somewhat positive light for what is viewed as their support of the value of women. But Earl Palmer points to a quotation from the gospel of Thomas, which is not in our Bible, that Simon Peter says, "Let Mary Magdalene go out from among us, because women are not worthy of life." And Jesus said, "See. I shall lead her." That is, I shall make her a man, that she, too, may become a living spirit, resembling you men. For every woman who makes herself a man will enter the kingdom of heaven." Does that sound like good news to you, ladies? Does that sound like good news to us, men?

It's interesting that in the book by Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code*, the Gnostic Gospels are held up as very positive in embracing women, and the church is considered, because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to reduce women's value. Well, John has a clear anti-gnostic statement here: Jesus invested special time with a Samaritan woman, who would be totally unacceptable. He went out of his way to be present for this woman, to meet her where her need was spiritually. We are baffled by this. We are unsettled, and we are preoccupied. We are thing- or task-oriented in this country. Food is often more important, often, than finding a relationship with a person. Lunch is more important than having a life-giving talk. The everyday tasks often become more important than those eternal moments when we might take some time out. The exclusive tasks of keeping the church going, versus the inclusive pattern of reaching out to other people, tend to preoccupy us.

God is bigger and more gracious, more embracing than we can possibly imagine. Jesus is saying to us, don't be grim reapers. Don't act as though you do not love the people who are outside the fold. Be the glad people of God and reap the harvest now. Make space to engage real people on their terms.

As I've said before, my father owned his own business. And he had to work hard for that business to run, but he did hear a voice from God in a key moment, saying "Relax, give me the business. I'll take care of it, and you do my work." One of things he heard as the work of God was to be available when people walked through the door and they wanted to talk about things that had nothing to do with business. And he would sit and listen. He would take the time to be with people when he needed to be getting other work done. But he always heard the voice of God saying, "Invest in people." Often he would take an hour to listen to a person, and not say a word. At the end of the conversation the person would say, "John, it's been so good to be with you. I feel so much better. You've really helped me." And my dad would turn to one of his sons and say, "You know, I haven't said a thing to that person."

Somehow, presence has a miraculous impact on people who are struggling and searching for answers in life." Jesus provided tremendous presence for people. The disciples were preoccupied with food, and Jesus was preoccupied with a woman. The disciples wanted Jesus to get on with the journey up into Gallilee, "We have a place to go." And Jesus said, "Let's take some more time here in Samaria." When the disciples said, "We've got some food we went into town to get." Jesus said, "I have food that you don't understand. Let's eat that." God is trying to get us away from our typical task-driven agendas: ourselves, our food, our time, our money, our jobs, our careers, our talents, our preoccupation with sexuality and things, and move toward focusing on people who are hungry to know God. Jesus is simply saying that this harvest is right now. And if we will take time to be present, we will participate in the experience that God has given us in welcoming people to the kingdom because we've been there, for them, and with them. Jesus' commitment is to move in close to people, to reach their true selves, and to be his true self.

Earl Palmer, in his reflections on this particular text, has said, "There's both in us a fear of being found out but a tremendous hunger and desire to be found." And Jesus meets both of these in the woman at the well. She is found out to be the person she is, with five husbands and currently living with a man who is not. But Jesus finds her, as a human being hungry to know God. Jesus reveals her true self, so that she no longer has the need to hide and manipulate life.

Now I am not much of a cook, but my wife will send me on foraging opportunities into stores that have pre-cooked food, and I'm fairly good at cooking precooked food. But inevitably when I enter the store, the agenda to get the food is taken over by the agenda to be present with people. And sometimes I'm pretty hungry. But inevitably someone comes up to me and wants to engage about their spiritual life. I'm torn at that moment between food and people. I think Jesus is clear here in saying that what really counts at those moments is to invest in people. Take the time.

In Wegman's in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, there was a woman behind the prepared food bar who would see me coming and want to talk about something significant in life as she gave me the food. In those thirty-second conversations, there were many transactions about her spiritual reflections and hunger. She talked one day about the concern for her husband and his job. She talked to me once about her fear of having cancer. Another time she talked about being in an automobile accident, was in a coma for four months, came out of it and experienced the presence of God. One time, I invited her to worship and she came. Another time I heard her confession because she had said something to her daughter that she was upset about. Another time I simply encouraged her to invest in discipleship and be with people who love her. Those conversations were about thirty seconds each. I discovered in those little encounters that to be present for a person doesn't take an extraordinary amount of time, but it takes an extraordinary amount of focus.

Jesus challenges our presuppositions about our priorities. These are presuppositions that block us from engaging real people in real time. We don't take the time to listen and attend. There are biases that cause us to resist the engagement. For example, the disciples asked Jesus: Why would you want to talk to a woman? Why would you want to talk to a Samaritan woman? Why would you want to talk to a Samaritan woman who has had five husbands and is now divorced and living with another man? There is judgment and condemnation sometimes in our avoidance and people can feel it and say, Well, you don't really care for me. And other times, it's simply preoccupation: we have other things that we want to do, and this person is simply interrupting our life. The disciples say, let's eat. Let's get some rest. Let's get on with the journey back to Gallilee. And Jesus says, let's wait and talk to these people. Jesus sees all these as opportunities to engage people on their terms because they are hungry to know God.

A friend of mine engaged a man in his late eighties at our church in Bethlehem. Bob was kind of a curmudgeon, very intelligent, PhD in economics. Hardly anybody wanted to talk to him, because when they did, they couldn't understand him. And the older he got, the more difficult the conversations became. He was brilliant, opinionated, alienated, and sometimes just downright obnoxious. This one man took some time one day to sit with Bob and listen to him. And what he heard in those few minutes was Bob's passion for social justice that had never been implemented in his eighty-seven years of his life. And what came out of that conversation was a commitment for Bob to invest \$150,000 into social justice that I doubt to this day would ever have come out and been invested if the time hadn't been taken to listen.

The number one pattern we are committing ourselves to today is people, the love of people, being present with people for the love of God. It is the mission at the doorstep. When we walk out of the sanctuary, we realize that the people with whom we engage are hungry to have the conversation about God. They're not disinterested. Most people who understand the culture say this is the hungriest point in recent history for people's spiritual inquisitiveness. So Christians, now is the time, the harvest is ripe. People want to ask about God. Are we making the time? Are we listening? Are we engaging?

The harvest is now, but we have to cross our condemnations, our judgments. We have to cross over our busyness and our presuppositions. We have to engage people on their terms, in spite of their race, their gender, their age, their class, their status. And sometimes, those are bridges too far. Be available, accessible, authentic. Attend, listen, observe, be present, ask questions. Be there.

When we give our money today, when we make our commitments to Jesus Christ and the church today, we are making a

commitment to be there for those outside these walls and those within these walls who are hungry to know God. Jesus sees the world at a different level than the disciples. It is not the trip to Gallilee that's important; it's the spiritual journey of the people on the trip. It is not about the food when people are hungry; it's about the people who hunger and thirst for God. It is not about morality and how people fit into a certain set of morality, it is about the love of the person and the presence with that person when they're struggling for direction. It is not about security and protection and avoidance to make sure we don't do the wrong thing; it is about engagement and empowerment of people who are struggling to do the right thing. It is not about policing those who break the law; it is about beckoning in love those who want to know Jesus Christ. It is not about condemning, it is about affirming the person who seeks. It is not about buying things; it is about investing in people. It is not about covering our tasks; it is about uncovering the mask that people put on because no one has taken the time to be with them.

God has sown the seeds and we have the privilege to reap the harvest, which is in huge abundance today. Will we take the time to do it? When we commit ourselves and our time and our money and our abilities, we are committing ourselves to be present for people who hunger and thirst after the living God. I commit to you today that the money you invest in this church will be used for those purposes, to seek and to save those who are lost, like Jesus did.

Amen.