

## Hope Month I – Dignity

### INTRO

When I was in my early 20s I had the opportunity to live in Nairobi, Kenya for a whole year. It was an amazing experience. I ate weird stuff, I went on crazy adventures, and I learned some useful Swahili phrases: “*Wewe! Unafikiri mimi ni mzungu mjinga?*”

But of all the things I learned in Kenya that year, probably the most surprising was just **how much American culture had shaped me**, specifically when it came to interacting with other people.

Kenyans in general are very social. Their society is much more communal than ours. **When a Kenyan first meets somebody**, the first thing they do is start asking them about which village their family is from, and the family name of their grandmother and who their great uncle married, until they find somebody they have in common.

Nobody’s a stranger. They’re just extended, extended family...

And of course, when someone is in a tough spot in their lives, they have a huge **social safety net** to fall back on.

Here, when someone is **grieving a death**, we say “Oh, let’s give them some space.” In Kenya, they literally set up a tent in the person’s front yard so friends and relatives and neighbors can flood the grieving family’s home for *days* so they aren’t alone for a minute.

Now, I know I’m oversimplifying things, but compared to my **American hyper-individualism**, all this communal living was uncharted territory for me.

And it was uncomfortable. I found myself with very little social stamina. I’d want to withdraw and be alone. It was more than being introverted. It was my lifestyle. It was what I knew.

Being immersed in Kenyan culture changed me in many ways, but when it comes to isolation what it did most was open my eyes. I finally realized just **how isolating our American culture had become**. And when I came back home, it only got worse.

That was 2005. Before the **smartphone**, before **Netflix**, before “**introverting**” became a verb... That was before “**bailing**” on someone at the last minute (“sorry, I’m not feeling well”) became commonplace. And it was before *being* bailed on was a relief (“oh, good, I can just veg tonight”).

That was before **social media** promised to “bring us all together” only to turn us into envious and rage-filled cage fighters.

Oh, and you know what else that was before? It was before a global *pandemic* forced us all into our homes, before work and school went virtual, before we could have food just show up on our doorstep with “contactless delivery.”

For those of us who are **tempted to spiral into self-focused isolation**, Coronavirus has been the perfect excuse.

And for those of us **who don’t want to be isolated**, who have been struggling with loneliness and who have a desperate need for human interaction, this pandemic has been like the nail in the coffin.

Senior citizens, single parents, people with disabilities, foster families, frontline workers... people *without* that social safety net.

Isolation has always been a problem in our individualistic culture, but now it’s becoming a crisis.

## SERIES INTRO

Here’s why this is a problem. First, **isolation literally kills**. More and more medical research is emerging which shows that a lack of social connection increases risks to your health as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

It affects your sleep, it affects your cardiovascular system, it even affects your immune system. If you are isolated, you are at a higher risk of premature death, period.

But it goes beyond just physical realities. **It also affects the spiritual.** Because we are the Church. We are the body of Christ. From the very beginning of this faith movement the Church was always meant to be communal.

We use our spiritual gifts *together*. We disciple and teach and correct one another *together*. We pray *together*. We worship *together*. That's why we put so much of an emphasis on you going through Rooted and joining life groups together.

Because we are spiritual family, and **our message of hope and healing** spreads the loudest and the farthest when we spread it as a community.

This isn't just an interpersonal thing. The good news of Jesus depends on it.

Now, over the last few months, because of the pandemic, we had to make the hard decision **to close our doors** as a way of protecting the vulnerable in our community and preventing the spread of the disease.

And it's entirely possible that if things in Indiana get way worse we may have to close our doors again.

But hear me when I say this: **we cannot allow this pandemic to lead our community further into isolation.** This cannot be a license to drift apart.

Why? Because isolation is one of the **six broken places** of our world, one of the evidences that our world is not the way it is meant to be. And it's one of the things God has put this church on the earth to heal.

It's one of the distinctives of Grace Church. We heal the broken places of our

world in Jesus' name. Hatred, pain, injustice, the decay of our planet, separation from God... and isolation.

So, no matter what happens with the virus in the days ahead, we - Grace Church - **are going to learn from Scripture** how to heal the broken place of isolation in the midst of this a very isolated time.

Welcome to Hope Month.

If you were here for Hope Month last year, you know we went deep into healing the broken place of hatred. This year our focus is isolation and the hope we have of healing it.

As with every Hope Month, our whole church is **studying these topics together** - Grace Kids, student ministries, and life groups...

We'll be talking about it on **Between Sundays**, our podcast, we'll be releasing supplemental content on **YouTube**. And throughout the month we'll be introducing events and activities to help you put these biblical ideas into practice.

You can find everything on our website, [gracechurch.us/hope](https://gracechurch.us/hope)

It's going to be good.

## SAMARITAN WOMAN

So let's dive in. Today we're going to look at the story of how Jesus interacted with a very isolated person in *his* time. This will be the starting point for our conversation. [House Bibles]

### **John 4:4**

Alright, so in this story, Jesus is on his way from Judea, the religious center of ancient Israel, up to Galilee, where he was born and where he spent most of his ministry. To get there, he chose to take his disciples up through **Samaria**,

which Jewish people generally tried to avoid.

### **John 4:4-15**

*He had to go through Samaria on the way. Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food.*

*The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"*

*Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."*

*"But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket," she said, "and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? And besides, do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?"*

*Jesus replied, "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life."*

*"Please, sir," the woman said, "give me this water! Then I'll never be thirsty again, and I won't have to come here to get water."*

So, Jesus sits by a well and meets a Samaritan woman in the middle of the day. In that time and place, this would have raised quite a few red flags.

First, **Jews and Samaritans** didn't like each other. The reasons why are kind of complicated, but if you really want to know I put some info in the app notes. Suffice it to say, Jesus, as a good, Jewish, rabbi, should have been a lot more careful so he wouldn't be made unclean by this half-gentile Samaritan.

Second, **she was a woman**. Again, in that day Jewish men believed they should avoid unnecessary conversations with women. They might be

unclean. You never know. There's even evidence that Jewish *rabbis* made a point never to speak publicly with *any* woman - even their own wife or daughters.

Better safe than sorry. So what is Jesus doing?!?

Finally, this woman is coming out to the well **alone in the middle of the day**. Normally, women collected water *together* when it was cool out; in the mornings and the evenings. It was safer, more comfortable... So why was this woman alone?

Was she an outcast? Was she sick? Was she ashamed? We don't know.

But we do know that **she is isolated**, and that this is shaping up to be a pretty scandalous situation. So how does Jesus respond? "Woah, lady. You're going to have to back up. I'm kind of a big deal."

No. What does he do? He asks her for a drink. This Jewish rabbi wants to put **his lips on a cup** which this *Samaritan woman* touched with her spiritually unclean hands.

Even the woman is taken aback. "You are asking *me* for a drink?" Why would Jesus put himself at risk like that?

Well, I think the answer is in verse 10. "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

**The gift God has for you.** I want to give *you* living water.

You see, when Jesus looked at this isolated woman, he didn't see an unclean Samaritan. What he saw was **a child of God**. What he saw was someone who deserved *life*. Jesus understood that

**The path out of isolation begins with dignity.**

Woman, you are not alone. **If you only knew** what was in store for you! He saw who she *was*, not who the world *said* she was.

Let's keep reading to see what happens next. She says, "Yeah! Sign me up for this living water. Give me some." This is what Jesus says:

**John 4:16-26**

*"Go and get your husband," Jesus told her.*

*"I don't have a husband," the woman replied.*

*Jesus said, "You're right! You don't have a husband—for you have had five husbands, and you aren't even married to the man you're living with now. You certainly spoke the truth!"*

*"Sir," the woman said, "you must be a prophet. So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?"*

*Jesus replied, "Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans know very little about the one you worship, while we Jews know all about him, for salvation comes through the Jews. But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."*

*The woman said, "I know the Messiah is coming—the one who is called Christ. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."*

*Then Jesus told her, "I AM the Messiah!"*

Alright, so right after telling her God has a gift in store for her, **Jesus calls this woman out** for having a bunch of husbands. He implies that she's some kind of hussy. Right?

At least, that's what I was always taught. The implication of the story was that she was an **immoral**, bad person, and that's why she was isolated.

But I wonder. Right after this whole husbands comment, they launch right into a **theological conversation** about worshipping God and Jesus doesn't bring it up again.

One thing we usually don't think about with this story is just **how little power women** had in the ancient world. It was unheard of back then for a woman to divorce her husband. It only worked the other way around.

So how did she have so many husbands? It might have been because she had been cast aside. One **rejection** after another. Or that her **husbands had all died** and left her destitute. Why do you think the Bible talks about caring for widows so much? Because the world sure didn't!

Maybe she was living with this other guy because she was **desperate** for someone to take care of her. Maybe she was isolated not because she was a floozie, but because life had chewed her up and spit her out.

Maybe the other women avoided her because they thought she was cursed.

We don't know.

All we know is that **Jesus did know this woman's story**. Whether she was immoral or a victim of injustice or somewhere in between, Jesus knew who she was. He knew she was isolated and he wanted her to find life.

Jesus saw her, treated her with respect, and he offered her hope.

**The path out of isolation begins with dignity.**

Let's see what happened as a result of this woman's newfound self-worth.

**John 4:27-30**

*Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked to find him talking to*



*a woman, but none of them had the nerve to ask, "What do you want with her?" or "Why are you talking to her?" The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" So the people came streaming from the village to see him.*

I love this. In just a few moments, this woman went from an isolated nobody on the bottom rung of society's ladder, to an effective evangelist. Because of her the entire village came to meet Jesus. **Dignity led this woman to her purpose.**

And I love the imagery here: This story begins with an isolated woman **walking alone to a well** in the heat of the day. And it ends with this same woman walking *back* to that well **surrounded by her neighbors.**

All it took was the compassion of someone willing to set aside cultural expectations, to risk their own reputation, so they could offer dignity to someone who was alone.

**The path out of isolation begins with dignity.**

DIGNITY

I started this message talking about the reality that isolation is epidemic in our culture, and that the pandemic is making it far worse. If we're going to be the Church - the body of Christ - in our world, then we've got work to do.

(And by the way, **the answer is not just more in-person worship services.** Yes, worshipping together is vital. But there are many isolated people in our community who can't or won't come into one of our buildings on the weekend. We're going to have to think bigger.)

Now, the isolation Americans are facing today may not be the same as that faced by the Samaritan woman (or maybe it is in some cases), but *healing* isolation requires **the same posture** today as it did back then - the posture of Jesus. Dignity is only the beginning.

Over the next several weeks, we are going to explore 5 key concepts which all play a role in healing the broken place of isolation in Jesus' name.

**Dignity**  
**Hospitality**  
**Unity**  
**Proximity**  
**Family**

(You know it's going to be good because they all end in "y.")

But here's what makes this series a bit unique. **Yes, we're going to call the Church to step up.** To identify those who are isolated in our world and to pursue them with love. To reach out to them.

So yes, this will be **a call to action.**

But, as I said before, many of *us* are facing deep isolation right now ourselves.

Whether we're trapped at home and starved for human interaction, or isolated because of our age or a disability, whether we have been cast aside by the world around us, or whether we've dug a pit of isolation for ourselves, the fact is, **this is a very lonely time.**

The words we look at this month are not just a call to action for the Church. They're also a call to hope for you.

Like dignity. When we know of isolated people in our lives we need to approach them like Jesus - **seeing them for who they really are.** Noticing their humanity. Calling them to something greater. The path out of isolation begins with dignity.

But **if we are the isolated ones**, for whatever reason, then *we* need to be the woman at the well. We need to listen to the words of Jesus. To see ourselves

the way he sees us. As children of God. With value. With a purpose. With a destiny.

Listen to me: **The days of believing the shameful lies about your identity are over.**

You are not defined by your worst mistake. You are not defined by your deepest injustice. You are the beloved child of our creator God and he wants to offer you living water.

As Jesus said, "If you only knew the gift God has for you..."

You are **created in the image of God**. I believe that means there is a part of God's heart and character in *you* that no one else has. The question is, are you willing to live into it?

So hold your head high. Have dignity in who you are. Because I'll tell you the truth. You are never alone.

You're **a part of our family now** and we love you for who you are.

[PRAY]