

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
March 12, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper**



**“The Properties of Water”
Christian Scripture: John 4:1-26**

I am a student of history and I teach Intercultural Communication. Both subjects educate us about a term or subject called ‘scapegoating’. “Scapegoating is the practice of singling out a person or group for unmerited blame and consequent negative treatment. Scapegoating may be conducted by individuals against individuals, individuals against groups, groups against individuals, and groups against groups.”¹

¹ “Scapegoating”, Wikipedia, found at:
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapegoating>, accessed March 12, 2023.

The term ‘scapegoating’ is not necessarily a socio-political term; it is a biblical term. In the Ancient Near East, a goat was sent out into the desert with all the people’s sins placed upon it. The goat was sent out to die. Let us read Leviticus 16:8-10.

“⁸He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. ⁹Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. ¹⁰But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat.”

Plenty documentaries and history books teach us that Adolph Hitler developed and fomented a pathological obsession that blamed the Jews of Germany’s humiliating capitulation in WWI at Versailles. Tsarist Russia did the same. In the wake of Russia’s humiliating loss to an ‘oriental’ foe, Japan, it catalyzed pogroms against the Jews to distract the populace from national disgrace.

Scapegoating is not limited to modern times. In Jesus’ era, Samaritans were blamed and distrusted by the Jews.² Samaritans were considered racially impure by the Jews. During the 730s, Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel. The

² *The Word in Life Study Bible*, New Testament Edition, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville; 1993), pp. 340-341.

Found at:

Bible.org, “Hatred Between Jews and Samaritans” found at:

<https://bible.org/illustration/hatred-between-jews-and-samaritans>, accessed March 13, 2023.

land was left desolate and the ten tribes were carried-off into exile. Some were left behind, a remnant, one might say, and they intermarried with those who moved into the vacuum. The descendants of those who were left behind and the new occupiers were the 'Samaritans' and they were not considered pure by the Jews who returned from Persia, after an even later exile.

Not only were the Samaritans racially impure, they were also considered theological impure, hybrids. They worshipped the same God of Israel, but they did not worship in Jerusalem where the rabbi Jesus and other Jews did. The Samaritans were almost considered idolaters because theological 'pollutants' from foreign sources often became mixed with the God of Israel.³ These theological differences caused enmity between Jews and Samaritans.

Most historical commentaries suggest that the woman at the well was a prostitute or that she was somehow an adulterous woman. This traditional interpretation has rendered this story a potential sex scandal (for her alone and/or for Jesus and her – for what was he doing talking to this woman alone?!) in addition to the racial and theological ones. Yet, the story never specifically indicates that she had ever done anything wrong. For example, Jesus does not tell her to repent of her sins (as he did in an another story). There is little in the story

³ Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary, found at: <https://bibleportal.com/commentary/section/mhc/verses-4-26-4588>, accessed March 12, 2023.

to suggest that she was scandalous; it could be that others perhaps scandalized her, thus forcing her unjustly to the well alone in the mid-day heat.

Historically, women have been used as scapegoats by men. Women were and still are today blamed for men's indiscretions and lust. This is 'born out' (pardon the pun) in the current debate over a woman's access to abortion and birth control medications. (The contestation *is* about control over women.) The story of Genesis where the woman, Eve, is *the temptress* got us all started. All the major monotheistic faiths have followed this pattern of misogynistic scapegoating, men blaming women for men's inability to control themselves. Perhaps the worst contemporary version of this is implemented by the Taliban who will not allow women to work so as to provide food for their children. Women's presence in the Afghan public sphere supposedly engenders too much sexual tension and thus men use the repression of women to maintain hegemonic control over them.

This whole dynamic of scapegoating of races, and religions, and women brings us to the story of the woman and the well. But first, let me address today's context as it relates to scapegoating.

Today, there is a new scapegoat: the LGBTIQ+ community (AKA the 'queer community') and a smaller subset of those who perform in 'drag'. Now, I

personally am not attracted to the whole drag *aesthetic*.⁴ Yet, as it concerns the safety of children, that assault weapons are not banned, and drag performances are, is ludicrous. Children are killed *en mass* due to assault weapons, not by queers. Certainly, drag queens are not killing children (young, violent, White, men with assault rifles often are).

What we have in many states is a scapegoating of the queer population. The LGBTIQ+ community is not a threat to our society. Yet, they and or their performances or dress are being banned unjustly. Men and women performing in drag are not a threat to our children or our society (and what is sexualized and what is not is highly subjective and thus debatable). Greed and the hoarding of money by the ultra-rich are a threat to our children and our society. The income disparity in our country is obscene. That so many families and children do not have access to health care is a threat to our children and our society. We must stand-up as an Open & Affirming (O&A) church! To me an O&A church, we must be affirming. And we must not allow queers to be persecuted as scapegoats.

In the story of the women at the well, we have what was wrongly perceived to be a scandal of race, religion, and sex transformed into the spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ. At the well, using the transformative example of living

⁴ By that my personal style is not ostentations, gaudy, flamboyant, attention-seeking, outrageous, or otherwise 'frilly'. I am a typical Yankee. Perhaps, boring. Staid. Plain. Reserved. For good and for bad. What I am speaking of is personal style and nothing else.

water, Jesus demonstrated that it was rich, substantive, truth-telling, communication, acceptance, and God's love that transforms peoples' lives. What many may think is scandal and what many believe is the source of our society's problems is not: not Samaritans, not Jews, not women, not queers, and not queens. It is perhaps hate, guns, and greed that are harming our children.

The properties of the living water at Jesus' well are communication, acceptance, and love. And those same properties are in this font of water here at the chancel. What we do at this church is offer living water. Not hate, not rejection, and not banning. Jesus gave living water to the woman at the well. At Centre Church, we offer this same water. This water represents conversation, acceptance, and love. Today, I am going to pray that our church continues to offer this water to all who chose to be with us. It is my prayer that all people will feel welcome this year to come and receive this water. And may we protect those are scapegoated.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".