

Leaning In

On this 3rd Sunday in the season of Lent, I find that Jesus' longest one-to-one conversation remembered in the gospel invites us to consider the challenges and value of leaning in. Through our opening words from neighbors for this morning, Sheryl Sandberg highlights the power of leaning in to express ourselves. And Mark Nepo highlights the power of leaning in to hear the other. Both leaning in behaviors (expressing and listening) are vital to the health of any community (that is, two or more people) of which we are part.

Let's be together in a moment of prayer, closing your eyes if it helps you to be present to God's steadfast presence with us. Holy Loving Spirit, we are grateful for freedom to gather this morning – on the live stream and on this land, which has been loved by First Nations and others throughout time and where we are now weaving our way of community. Be with us as we wonder about opportunities to lean in. Open the eyes of our hearts so that we see with whom you are calling us to lean in with care – care enough to both listen and speak. We pray this as followers of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

How can we tell when God's Spirit is guiding us to lean in? One way to get at that question might be to consider what it feels like in a moment when we intentionally lean in as opposed to creating distance.

- Our **body** might give us a signal such as heightened sensory alertness or nervousness.
- Our **mind** might spark with curiosity about the possibilities that could come from leaning in.
- We might feel an **emotion** of longing – longing to deepen a relationship so that we know and are known more fully.
- Our **gut intuition** might signal that keeping a distance (while superficially comfortable) is just not right – that leaning in is what is needed.

I wonder, who comes to mind for you when I ask this: In what relationship or community would you and another benefit from the shared practice of leaning in to listen to one another and express yourselves? And what good might come from leaning in in that space?

Let's consider the interaction between Jesus and the woman (who had a name, which has not been shared with us), curious about how they model leaning in.

We heard this: *"Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well."* Now, as an out-of-towner, Jesus could have laid low – perhaps found a spot to rest on the edge of town while his disciples had stepped away to bring back lunch. Instead, Jesus sat in a prominent spot in town, knowing full well that he would have opportunity to interact with locals.

As the woman approached the well, alone, Jesus would know a cross-cultural truth – that widowed and single women lived on the margins, often avoided by those who lived within the structure of marriage – happily or not, but definitely accepted by their society on face value.

So we see a few moves by Jesus and the woman. The first one is the wisdom of practicing curiosity versus avoidance. When Jesus asked the woman for a drink of water, it would have made a lot of sense for her to keep her eyes and head down, pretend she hadn't heard, and simply walk away.

Instead, she asked, *"How is it that you, A Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"*

Well, Jesus clarifies. He leans in and says, 'If you know who I was (if you knew of my reputation), you would be asking me for a drink of living water.'

Then the woman practices 'tell me more.' And I think that is something we could all do well to practice more. She says, *"Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"*

Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

That gave Jesus an opportunity in this verbal repartee to say, 'Oh! I am talking about a different kind of water. I can give you God's water that will spring up into eternal life within you'

She kept asking him to tell her more. She kept her feet in the fire of leaning in. *"Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."*

This woman was so brave in her curiosity and interest in learning more. Some of us have never dove deep into why the Samaritans and the Jews had such a separation between them. Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerizim. That was the place where Abraham had prepared to sacrifice his son and an act of worship in obedience to God. Others of their ancestors split apart and decided to worship God in the holy city they had created of Jerusalem. So there was a geographical divide between them. The Samaritans honored the *Pentateuch* (the first 5 books of the Bible) and did not venerate the many additional prophetic and poetic writings in what Jewish people know as the *Tanakh*. Modern-day Jews refer to the *Pentateuch* and *Tanakh* together as the *Torah*. As Christians, all of these Hebrew scriptures from Hebrew speaking people are what we refer to it as the Older Testament. So they had difference in geography (and where the holy place should be for worship) and also which writings they considered most sacred.

And so, knowing all that context, she practiced another move that I would refer to as saying what you need to say. If you are not yet familiar with the John Mayer song, "Say," I definitely recommend it to you. The theme of it is to say what we need to say. And this, I think, is the most important part of the whole long conversation.

She says, *“Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”*

To which Jesus responded, *“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

I think that this soliloquy by Jesus is a bit of an enigma. Was Jesus emphasizing their similarity? Was he considering salvation as having come through the children of Abraham all the way back, which encompassed both of them? Or was he highlighting his specific identity and his call to bring a message of God’s salvation? It’s hard to know. It seems as though he may have even learned something within the interaction with her.

Another move that I think is really important and highlighted at the end of this story is the power of second-hand stories. I have noticed during this time we have been living in the state of Minnesota and tumultuous things that are happening throughout our state and throughout the country – that there is real power in coming to understand well the story of an immediate neighbor (even if it is not the same reality and circumstances that we ourselves are living). If we can come to understand their story and have their permission to repeat it, we spread knowledge of what is really going on. And I think that is highlighted here when it said, *“Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘HE told me everything I have every done... They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.’”*

I believe that, by sharing one another's stories with permission, we become more knowledgeable about the work of God in each of our lives.

I do think that leaning in is an antidote to confirmation bias. This is a term that gets throw around a lot. I wanted to say correctly what it is. We all experience it. Confirmation bias is *"the cognitive tendency to search for, interpret, favor , and recall information that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses. It involves giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities and, often unintentionally, ignoring contradictory evidence, which can lead to poor decision-making."*

I am heartened by all that is happening in our local area. One specific example that is leaning in as an antidote to confirmation bias is the new St. Croix Valley chapter of Braver Angels, where they are trying to *"bring Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic."*

I also think that we, through our Lenten Vespers, are leaning in in a way that can combat confirmation bias. If you look in the bulletin and decide to come on these coming Wednesdays, you'll notice the themes that these individuals plan to speak about. And you may think that you already know about struggles of the heart, about what post-traumatic stress is, about how to do communication well in personal relationships. But guess what?! You may be challenged in your bias of how you think life works if you were to open and listen to a friend share from their valid, true life experience.

I'd like to close by sharing an echo of words from the devotional writer. So I invite you to close your eyes if it helps you to hear this blessing as we practice leaning in toward one another. Matt Laney wrote, *"Jesus [and I would add the woman] didn't avoid complexity. Maybe because he was a hybrid himself...Isn't that what we all want?"*

To be seen in our contradictions, our mess, our complexity – and still be loved? Real love doesn't flinch or sanitize. It takes everything in and stays."

Friends, let's practice steadfast leaning in toward one another. God's Love is counting on us. Amen.

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John 9:1-34, "Unrecognizable"