“Hi, old person! It’s my birthday!”

Four-year-old Norah Wood was shopping with her mom when she spotted Mr. Dan Peterson going down the bread aisle. Mr. Dan stopped and spoke with the little girl and her family and then went about the rest of his shopping. Next thing he knows, here’s the little girl again.

You can see the security footage online. Little Norah just reached out to this total stranger, tracked him down again, and in the full glory befitting a four-year-old on her birthday, demanded a hug.

Norah got her hug and then asked her mom to take a picture of her with her new friend.

“You don’t know this,” said Mr. Dan, as his lip quivered and he began to tear up, “But this is the first time for quite a while that I’ve been this happy.”

The two soon became an internet sensation when Norah’s mom shared their story on her Facebook page. A mutual friend reached out and shared that Mr. Dan had just lost his wife. It wasn’t too long after that little Norah Wood and her family became weekly visitors to Mr. Dan’s door. He was her special guest at pre-k graduation, he gave her tours of his vegetable garden, and they shared frequent hugs.

Their friendship flourished for four years until, earlier this month, Mr. Dan passed away. Norah had just visited him the day before he died and at the funeral Dan’s brother said, “Dan was late to his own service – four years late, to be exact.” All
because a little girl reached out to him in the grocery store during some of his darkest days.

“Hi, old person!” might sound rude to some, but for Norah and Mr. Dan, it was an honest hello that led to a relationship that meant life and well-being, connection and community.

How do we learn to talk like Norah? So that relationships form and life takes hold anew? Where delight bubbles up between us and in us? Where we might somehow even find God in us?

We are following the rhythm of the Sarum prayer this Lenten season, asking God to be in us. This week our focus is the third line: God be in my mouth—and in my speaking. And if I can be honest for a second, y’all, “God be in my mouth” sounds kinda weird to me.

Maybe honesty’s the point. God be in my mouth, and in my speaking. Let me tell the truth.

In our scripture today we get to overhear an incredibly honest encounter by Jacob’s well – it’s the Woman at the Well story.

Jesus comes to a well with his disciples around lunch time. The disciples run off to the nearby town to buy lunch and a woman from that town walks up to get some water.

This is an odd set up, for several reasons.

First, folks would not choose to draw water in the heat of the noonday sun, during the hottest part of the day. Why does this woman not join the other people? Is she a loner? What has she done to deserve isolation? Why don’t people like her? And so a shadowy pall falls over this unnamed character at the well at noontime.
And second, what is Jesus doing in Samaritan territory anyway? He’s not supposed to be in Samaritan territory, and God forbid he even speak to a Samaritan.

Anyway, Jesus asks this woman for water, she basically says, “Ha-ha, stop being weird; we aren’t even supposed to be talking,” and Jesus gives her that line about the Living Water.

Things escalate quickly. She says, “Lordy, how are you gonna do that? The well is deep and you ain’t even got a bucket.” And he’s like, “No, no, the Water I give will become in you a wellspring gushing up to eternal life.”

“Yeah, yeah, give me that water so I don’t have to keep coming back to this well.” (She’s not getting it.)

“Go call your husband and come back,” Jesus says. Boom, mic drop.

That gets the woman’s attention. She tries to play it cool, “I don’t have a husband.” And Jesus tells her entire story, about her five or so husbands. She’s impressed, calls him a prophet, and starts reaming him with questions – “Your people say we should worship in Jerusalem, but my people have always worshipped here, so…”

This is a full-out, honest debate.

And Jesus told her the truth. And she told her truth. Neither held back. Jesus even outs himself as the Messiah. She begins to believe.

And then the disciples get back and it’s awkward. They are confused. They are thoroughly tabooed. They are familiar with this courtship-at-the-well scenario. Why is Jesus talking with this woman? This Samaritan woman.
She runs off, leaving her water jar in haste, and starts telling her people about what Jesus said to her.

Meanwhile, in the part we didn’t read today, Jesus is locked onto something the disciples cannot see. Pastor George preached last week about “God be in our eyes—and in our seeing.” Jesus has eyes to see things as they really are and acted accordingly, which, because they did not understand, maybe looked a little silly to the disciples, maybe a little disorienting, or maybe a little inappropriate.

I can see Jesus sitting there with a bemused look on his face, the lunch the disciples keep prodding him with absolutely forgotten. “I have food to eat that you know not of,” he says.

In other words, Jesus is absolutely tickled about something the disciples cannot yet taste. He’s staring across a field, perhaps a higher plane, amazed by a spiritual truth right under their noses: “The harvest is ready,” he says, “Look around you, sower and reaper can rejoice together – this is happening much faster than I anticipated – the Kingdom of heaven has come near.“

Connection is possible. Relationship is possible. Even in Samaria.

Next thing, here comes a crowd of Samaritans behind the woman Jesus met at the well, not with torches and pitchforks, but with an invitation of hospitality. Imagine that!

An entire town brought into relationship with Jesus. An entire town hopped right over mountains of taboo and tradition to Truth – to make connection, to be known and loved.

And all of this started with a simple request for water, in, to be honest, what started
out to be a pretty awkward situation.

With his honesty, Jesus steps between worlds, allowing layers and layers of tradition and “how things are” to intersect through him. In one simple act – speaking with a Samaritan woman – he opens the “world as it is” to the “world as it could and should be.” Instead of being cut off from one another because of theological differences, societal expectations, gendered limitations, or moral questions, Jesus opens the flood gates of God’s grace by simply being his authentic, honest self with a woman no one wanted to share life with.

Maybe we’d like to think it’s not that simple, but, as Jesus says, you don’t need a bucket for this well. You just ask. Be honest about wanting connection, and it’s there: the Wellspring of Life.

In the Celtic tradition, wells are holy places. They are portals to the Other world, channels to another realm, a holy plane. In olden days, women tended these springs, keeping them free of debris and erosion. They also received travelers, wayfarers, or just anyone really needing a meal. They offered healing and hospitality to all, and a place for prayer.

You can still come upon wells in Ireland. They arise in some of the most unassuming of places. You can even be walking across a field and suddenly stumble upon fresh, clean drinking water bubbling up at your feet.

Someone once said, “To find a spring is to find the meaning of grace.”

What you need, offered freely, given completely. Easy as that.
In his bemused joy, Jesus says that the fields are ripe. He says that the fields are ripe with opportunity to do good, to connect what's disconnected, heal what is broken, truth-tell what's lied about, and liberate what's locked up.

Jesus sees what we cannot see. Springs of Living Water. Food we “know not of.” Jesus can see the world as it truly is and what he says is that despite appearances, connection is possible. Relationship is possible. The harvest is ripe for the Kingdom of God.

Tell the truth, Jesus says, and you will reap that for which you have not labored.

Tell the truth, he says, and others will believe.

Tell the truth, he says, and they will know me for themselves.

When we tell the truth it’s God in our mouths.

This whole woman-at-the-well story begins in John 4 with Jesus on the run. The Pharisees are making trouble again in Judea, so Jesus and the disciples are on the move and quick. That is why they take that shocking shortcut through Samaritan territory. It was common to take the long way around that place – because “Jews did not hold things in common with Samaritans.” “But he had to go through Samaria,” the text says.

To go through a place in those days was an intimate experience. They weren’t locked away in cars and zooming past at 70 miles per hour. They had to go through there, go in there, their feet receiving the hospitality of that foreign ground, their parched mouths tasting water from foreign wells, their hearts making connection with a people so derided by Jesus’ own people.
Jesus must go through Samaria – maybe because it was time for him to make a connection where he dared not before. Maybe it was time for him to take a stand with a group his own people were prejudiced against. Maybe it was time for Jesus to tell a truth his people, even his own disciples, were really not going to like.

A friend of mine from seminary draws strength from Jesus’ need. She is a powerful black woman and minister who has faced so many undue challenges in this world. I find it humbling as a white woman from the South to learn that she would want to do like Jesus and continuously “go through Samaria,” intentionally and deliberately putting herself in spaces where she might break the hold of prejudices and make new connections, seeking relationships of healing, grace, and honesty.

Like the Samaritan woman herself, my friend hears Jesus’ truth and is empowered to risk connection and relationship in a world that does not trust her because of her skin color. She throws off the shadowy pall of society’s suspicion and tells her truth in the full light of the noonday sun.

God is in her mouth and in her speaking.

We can tell the truth, too.

I heard of a church in North Carolina who got so good at telling the truth, that it bubbled up and overflowed their relationships with self and one another. It turned into action. When they heard one of their neighbors was about to be deported, they got the word out, gathered up, and mobilized to immobilize the ICE van with their truth. They joined hands and circled the vehicle while singing “Amazing Grace” at the top of their
lungs. Talk about truth. ICE couldn’t move the van until 27 church members were arrested and physically moved out of the way.

God was in their mouths and in their, well, singing.

We can tell the truth, too.

And, you see, it’s not just our voices, our thoughts, or our hard labor making ready the fields. When we tell the truth, we join the long and loving line of truth-tellers coming down through history, that thing we call the great cloud of witnesses or the Kingdom of God.

We are not alone in this work. When we dare tell the truth as we see it and show up as our honest-to-God selves, our truth joins with all truth and becomes in us a wellspring unto eternal life – that eternal reality we know to be God’s own.

When we are honest, when we decide to bypass the layers of complications that would keep us apart, we leave room for the Spirit of God to bubble up and spill over into the lives of those around us, setting us free to share authentic life together.

When we are honest, we might find ourselves somehow right beside Jesus, bemused looks on our faces, staring at something wonderful we couldn’t quite see before. Indeed, we might say, the harvest is ripe. Look at what God has done.

God, be on our mouths and in our speaking.

God, be on our mouths and in our speaking.

In this moment, wherever you find yourself, would you join me in that prayer? We’ll say it together:

God, be on our mouths and in our speaking. Amen.