

**Sermon for Gayle's Celebration of New Ministry
St. Michael's in the Hills, Toledo (Ottawa Hills), Ohio
Saturday, June 15, 2024**

Evelyn Underhill

Good afternoon. I am so grateful for the invitation to join you in celebrating this important milestone in the life of a congregation: the celebration of a new shared ministry between you, the people of St. Michael's in the Hills, and the Rev. Gayle Catinella—my good and dear friend. The liturgy that we have today—which includes a renewal of our own baptismal covenant—reminds us that we live in a new life—eternal life—through Jesus Christ, as we renew our mission of ministry in the world.

Today is also the feast of Evelyn Underhill, the early 20th Century English Anglo-Catholic writer who influenced our understanding of Christian mysticism, while her later work emphasized the spiritual life of ordinary people and God's presence in the everyday.

That is what I want to focus on today—the spiritual life of us, ordinary people, who experience God through everyday moments and actions. Evelyn Underhill wrote, “God is always coming to you in the Sacrament of the Present Moment. Meet and receive him there with gratitude in the sacrament.” (*Life as Prayer*, p. 186). The challenge to us is, are we open to God's presence in these everyday moments?

Today's Gospel, part of the fascinating exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, is one such story about the spiritual life of an ordinary person in an everyday moment. She is coming to the well to retrieve water needed for the day—an crucial daily chore. Here she encounters Jesus. Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, an associate professor at Campbell University in North Carolina, notes in a commentary from 2023, that the Samaritans and the Jews are still enemies in the first century CE, and Jesus is talking to someone who is first, from a group of people who are seen as enemies, second a woman (and women don't talk to men in public), and third, someone who is shunned by her own community because of her lifestyle. Professor Bashaw also notes

that in scripture meeting at a well is a betrothal-type scene, which adds to the shock of the encounter to its original audience. This particular well, however, is the gift of Abraham, the common ancestor to both Jews and Samaritans. So Jesus and the woman are meeting on equal ground, and Jesus invites her into conversation.

Karoline Lewis, a professor of Biblical teaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota compares this conversation with the one Jesus has with Nicodemus in the previous chapter of John's gospel which we heard a few weeks ago:

Nicodemus is a man, and he has a name—while this woman does not. He is a Pharisee and, thus, a Jewish leader and authority figure—an insider. She is a Samaritan with almost zero status and an outsider. Nicodemus comes at night, while Jesus and the woman meet at noon in broad daylight. Here I quote, “Nicodemus cannot move beyond the confines of a religious position, while the Samaritan woman moves beyond her own religious expectations and engages Jesus in theological debate.” So, the person with no status is the one who truly engages Jesus.

The entire exchange between these two is pretty amazing. It is the longest conversation in the gospels between Jesus and anyone, according to Professor Bashaw. In the section we heard today, the woman says to Jesus, we worship God on the mountain, but you (as a Jew) say people must worship God in Jerusalem. However, Jesus flips all of these religious expectations from both sides on their head by proclaiming that “true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.” God is not segregated from anyone because of geographic inaccessibility or group identity. Instead, God wants us to worship with sincerity and from the heart, as well as to live in the truth that scripture reveals to us about God. *Where* worship happens and *who* worships is irrelevant, why people worship is what matters.

So what does that mean for us? Are we “true worshipers who worship God in spirit and truth”? Are we the ones who will engage with people, even those from the “enemy

camp” and invite them into the knowledge of “eternal life,” a term that Professor Bashaw calls “John’s shorthand for a new quality of life—not heaven”? How do we encounter God in the moments of our daily lives? I believe that we do so through committing to and preparing ourselves for these encounters.

Today, we celebrate the shared ministry between a priest and a community of faith that are pledging to walk together into a new journey to share the love of God through Jesus Christ. This is a chance not only to honor the past but to go ever deeper into the work God has given us to do. Like the woman at the well, we are witnesses of Jesus and are called to go out into the community here in Toledo and beyond to share the Good News.

Just a few minutes ago, we officially welcomed Rev. Gayle into this faith community, and we are about to reaffirm our own baptismal covenant. So, it is a moment for all of us—particularly those of us who are lay people—to recommit ourselves to ministry within the Church and engage in this work to build Beloved Community beyond our walls. As Evelyn Underhill writes in her book, House of the Soul: “You don’t have to be peculiar to find God, but you do have to make a willed commitment to make Him the center of your life, all aspects of it!” (*House of the Soul*, p. 90). Now, like the young Samuel, it is our time to say, “Here I am, Lord.”

As a lay person in the Church, I want to offer some thoughts about how we can recommit ourselves in honor of this celebration of new ministry and to prepare ourselves to encounter God through Jesus Christ in the everyday moments of our lives:

First, commit to coming regularly to worship. Your presence makes a difference. Showing up is a critical first step, and when you worship in spirit and truth, you will receive what you need to go out to love and serve.

Second, engage in scripture. Commit yourselves to at least one form of Bible study that meets regularly. If you cannot find an existing one that meets your schedule, consider

starting your own group and invite friends and family to join you. Like the woman at the well, engage Jesus in theological debate.

Third, let go of the things and practices that no longer serve you—both personally and as a faith community. You can then be open to doing something new and uplifting—and, perhaps, even impactful.

Fourth—and this is really crucial—get to know your neighbors. Go to the places where people in your community gather (like the well in first century Samaria) and start talking to them. You don't need a collar to do this. Take a church friend or two to a coffee shop, or a library, a restaurant, or a bookstore. Attend a city council or school board meeting. These are spaces to encounter God and see God at work in the world. So, find out who your neighbors are and what they care about.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, don't be afraid. Go ahead and do something new—and if it doesn't work the way you expected, learn from the experience and move on to the next thing. The lessons you learn will take you to the next point on the journey. These words from Evelyn Underhill resonate this idea, “Love is creative. It does not flow along the easy paths, spending itself in the attractive. It cuts new channels, goes where it is needed.”

Finally, I want to say a few things about Gayle. Although there are many things that I can tell you about her, I want to highlight primarily that she is a faithful and steadfast companion. With the many scrapes we have found ourselves in during our adventures over the years (and I will not dare to describe them on this occasion; that will get into so much trouble), I cannot emphasize enough what an important quality that is. The work that we have ahead of us is not easy, and we will need such companions to keep us going.

You are so lucky! You have a fantastic priest as your spiritual leader. Gayle is smart, wise, compassionate, and very funny—and she will walk faithfully with you as you

engage in the world—in ways you cannot now imagine. Together, you will grow St. Michael's into an essential partner with other community leaders across Toledo to address the pressing issues of our time.

Truly, I can hardly wait to see what you do in the next few years. You are in really good hands, because, if you have not already figured it out, Gayle rocks! Just wait to see all that God has in store for you!

I leave you with a final quotation from Evelyn Underhill that expresses the commitment we are making to each other in this celebration of new ministry: "[The spiritual life of individuals has to be extended both vertically to God and horizontally to other souls; and the more it grows in both directions, the less merely individual and therefore more truly personal it will become.](#)" So, each of us is called to extend our spiritual life to others, both with our companions in the Church and to our neighbors beyond these walls. That is how we worship in spirit and truth.

AMEN!