Years ago, at one of the Episcopal Church’s conventions, a goal was set to, if I remember correctly, double the size of the church by sometime around now. I am a little vague on the details, because it appears that the internet has been scrubbed of all references to this action, but the gist of this declaration was that the church was really going to grow in the early 2000’s. Obviously, that has not happened, but it wasn’t for a lack of committees, press announcements and study groups looking into the issue and producing lots of words about this goal. Now I do not think that it is terrible to want the church to grow. In fact, I think it would be a good and wonderful thing if it did, but I simply want to point out that the church, at least since medieval times, has not grown by imperial decree. The church instead grows through thousands and thousands of smaller actions, by much less important people like you and me. And in today’s Gospel we see an example of one such low-level interaction, where real change happens.

If you were not paying attention to the Gospel reading from a few moments ago let me quickly recap. There was a Samaritan woman who came to draw water from a well where she meets Jesus. She and Jesus then have a spirited discussion and somewhere in the course of this conversation she comes to believe that there is something special about him. She then runs back into the city and tells those she encounters, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” There is then a little discussion between Jesus and the disciples about food, both literal and metaphorical. Then the narrative shifts back to woman and the townspeople who by now have made it back to where Jesus and the disciples are. It is here we read, “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.” After that snippet we end the story with this statement, “And many more believed because of his word. 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.’”

Now I do not want to make too large of point with this story and say if you just run back to your neighborhoods and tell them you have found the Messiah that all churches in the greater Delafield area will be packed by next Sunday. I simple want to point out how organic this whole thing was – it was a few people talking. There was no committee formed to stare down from the balcony, there was not a trialogue between Jesus, the disciples, and the Samaritans nor where there seven separate task forces formed to study the issue of Jesus’ Messiahship. Instead, there was a conversation between Jesus and this Samaritan woman which was followed up by a conversation between this woman and some of the people she knew. This rather simple sequence of events leads to the phrase, “and many more believed.” And again, we need to resist the modern temptation to turn this story into the latest church growth strategy that we can post online and say click here to learn The Samaritan Woman at the Well’s Ten Evangelism Secrets. Because, in so doing we would miss the point. What I really want to do by looking at this story is point out how different things are from what we tend to think of when we think of evangelism or church growth or whatever it is that we want to call it. This story is not the story of a great awakening or a youth explosion or even a committee on outreach, rather it is the story of a lady talking to some of her neighbors. Part of our problem these days is that we tend to think of evangelism like all other things in our lives that people want to sell, which in practicality means that we put Christianity on par with any other consumer product. And since we think of it like a consumer product, we think it needs to be sold in the same way -- it needs marketing, a slick website, a smoke machine and so on. Again, there may be times and places for these things, but if they become the focus it creates an issue. And one of the main issues it creates is that we see the church and bringing people to the church as somehow detached from ourselves. The church becomes a place where we go and if we want anyone else to come, we get an outside agency to make that happen. But here is the thing, we are the church. Yes, the church has buildings, it has committees, it has clergy and liturgy and all of that but its body are those who come.

The other day I was driving in Pewaukee and came across a building that had obviously been a church, which was now some sort of home décor consignment store. It always makes me a little sad when I see a closed church, especially one that is in an area that is obviously thriving. But there is also another, very obvious, thought that goes through my head and that is that building is no longer a church. It may have the right shape, it may have people coming and going, but the soul that made it a church is gone. Not to be too morbid, but it’s like seeing a dead body. The physical characteristics are still there, but what made that body a certain person is gone.

There is an old teaching tool in philosophy classes where the teacher or professor is talking about the essence of something. To engage the students, they play a game where they remove parts of an object, piece by piece and then ask if it is still that object. For example, if you take something like a bicycle and you remove a pedal, you would then ask if it is still a bike. Most people would say it still is so the game moves on to removing the chain and so on. At some point, with enough pieces removed we would say that it is no longer a bike, but the line is always a little hard to establish. We can play this game with the church too. If we remove a pew, is it still a church or if we get rid of the choir, is it still a church? And just like the bicycle there would be a point where we would say that it is no longer a church. However, there is one thing that would make it cease to be a church in one move and that is if we removed all of the people. Sure, there might still be a church building, but as in Pewaukee, a church building is not a church. And to go back to our Gospel lesson today, what we saw with the Samaritan woman at the well was the beginnings of a church. No, they did not have a building or a senior warden but they came together to be in the presence of Jesus. And people coming together to be in the presence of God, is the thing that cannot be removed from the idea of “the church.” What this means in practicality is that we are all, to a certain extent, ministers in this church. Now I don’t mean this in some extreme protestant sense, where we get rid of ordained clergy, I simply mean that we are all like the Samaritan woman and have a job of telling others about what we have seen and found.

We have had decades of church growth committees and church growth strategies with little to show for it, so maybe it is time to get back to the basics we see today. The church is us and we can tell our friends. I am not guaranteeing that this will make us double our size within the year, but simply pointing out that this is our job. Jesus did not ask us for results, he rather asks us to share his message so that we may be his this day and forevermore.