



“Tell Us Your Story”

John 4:5-42

August 30, 2026

Rev. Trip Porch

Broad Street Presbyterian Church

Columbus, Ohio

Let me start with the obvious. I am not Taylor.

Taylor Barner is our Presbyterian Campus Minister at Jacob's Porch,

In case you haven't heard of Jacob's Porch

It is the ecumenical home of all presbyterian, Lutheran, methodist and Episcopalian ministry on OSU's campus. It's down on 13th ave, across the street from the union.

Taylor was supposed to be preaching for you all this morning, but due to unforeseen circumstances we had to shuffle things around. I took over Taylor's preaching responsibilities as the co-chair of the OSUKirk board and Brittany, my spouse and one of your pastors is filling in for me at my church, Indianola Presbyterian, so that I could be here with you.

Also, for sake of clarity,

OSUKirk is the name of the board that supports presbyterian ministry at Jacob's Porch... OSU part of it is obvious, the Ukirk part is what presbyterian campus ministry is called nationwide: U for university, Kirk for the Scottish word for church, a nod to Presbyterians' Scottish heritage. But Taylor handed me his sermon and shared about his experiences as a campus minister at OSU, so what you'll hear from here on out is mostly from him...

There is a couch at Jacob's Porch. It's an orange couch. It sits just inside the front door and apart from being vibrant orange... it looks like any other couch you might find in a campus ministry house, the kind that has seen a decade of coffee and conversation.

From August at the start of the semester and into October, that couch goes for a walk.

If you're on High Street near campus or on the Oval in the fall, you might see it coming. The pastors at Jacob's Porch wheel it out of the house and set it up right on the main drag with a sign that says, "Tell Us Your Story."

It's hard to miss.

When they arrive on the oval, the pastors at Jacob's Porch sit on that couch from ten in the morning until four in the afternoon, 6 hours a day...doing nothing but listening to whatever student is curious enough, or brave enough, to sit down and talk.

Taylor told me that last fall, across all the hours that he was on the couch. The couch was empty for a total of fifteen minutes.

Fifteen minutes.

Think about what that means.

On a campus of sixty thousand people, where everyone is busy and everyone is rushing on their way to somewhere else...

There is often a line of students waiting to sit on a used couch and tell the truth about their lives.

The orange couch started almost ten years ago, partly as an answer to the other kinds of evangelism that show up on the oval's sidewalk.

You know the ones. The bullhorn preachers shouting at students with the signs that tell you that you're going to hell.

But mostly the couch was started because of a hunger that hasn't gone anywhere: students who want a real connection with a real person, and yet they are not finding one.

What the Jacob's Porch staff figured out is that connection is built through story. Through listening to where somebody has been. Through being willing to say the intimate thing, or the joyful thing, or the thing that still hurts.

Some students sit down and give their whole life's story. Others just want to talk about their week. Some come with good news they haven't gotten to share with anybody yet. Others confess something they've never said out loud before.

And almost every one of them, once they've finished talking, they get curious and turn the question around. ... so why are you here? Why do you do this? Are you with a church?

Taylor says there's something beautiful in the fact that enough students assume that they are, especially when it's rare to see a church creating a space for people like this...

But this is what evangelism looks like for Jacob's Porch, a loving, listening presence in contrast to the other more manipulative styles of evangelism that happen on campus. The orange couch is their outreach to students. Meeting students where they are and as they are a part of what our pastors on campus do. Listening to their stories. And then, if you're invited, telling the story of our ministry back.

About half the students who show up at Jacob's Porch for their other programs like worship, bible study, or discussion groups on any given week were first met on that couch.

I think the orange couch, and the tell us your story ministry is more than a good outreach idea, I think it reflects something about who Jesus is, about the manner in which he outreached to people, and how he wants us to continue to outreach to people today.

Stories were how Jesus engaged in the world. Stories were how Jesus taught... stories were how Jesus formed connections with people and helped them understand the world God was hoping to create.

He dealt in parables, mostly. About seeds and lost coins and a father running down a road.

In our gospel reading today, it's the exchange of stories that are at the center of the connection between Jesus and this woman at the well.

The passage begins with Jesus traveling from Judea north to Galilee, and the road runs right through Samaria. That detail matters more than it sounds.

Jews and Samaritans were enemies. They had been at each other for centuries. Descending from the same ancestors, using the same first five books of scripture, and yet there was constant enmity between them. It's why Jesus told so many stories involving Samaritans.

The Samaritans worshiped one way, The Jews worshiped another, and each side was certain the other had corrupted the faith.

When people in John's Gospel want to insult Jesus, one of the things they call him is a Samaritan. In Luke, when a Samaritan village won't host them, two of the disciples ask Jesus if they can call down fire and burn it.

So Jesus is in Samaria, and Jesus stops at a Samaritan well. A place that would have been so foreign to him and the disciples.

It's Midday. Hot. The disciples have gone into town to find food, which means Jesus is sitting alone in this foreign country.

And a woman comes out to draw water.

She is alone, in the heat of the day, which is not normally when you come to the well... so it tells Jesus that this woman is all alone.

Jesus reaches out to this stranger at the well and asks her for a drink...

And it sparks conversation. They talk. They find common ground. And somewhere in the conversation about water and wells, about the divide between their people... somewhere in their early formation of a human to human relationship Jesus starts talking about living water...

"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again." He says, "Whoever drinks the water I give will never be thirsty. It becomes a spring inside them, welling up."

And she says: Sir, give me this water.

By the end of their conversations, she's had a revelation, This is not just some Jewish man she met, this Jesus is the messiah, and she leaves her water jar sitting there and running into town to tell everyone this story

An outsider from their faith, with no standing and no credentials, becomes the first evangelist proclaiming to her community who Jesus is...

The person the disciples would have crossed a road to avoid walks out of that scene as the one carrying their message...

So sit with what Jesus actually does here. He crosses into unfamiliar territory. He asks a stranger for help. He listens. He tells her the truth and refuses to shame her with it. He includes her before she believed anything. And then he trusts her with the story, to tell it in her own words.

There is a pattern to Jesus' work here.

And I want to name that this to me, is the work we get to share with our partners at Jacob's Porch. This is the work that our presbyterian campus ministry board, OSUKirk, exists to fund so that ministry like this can be sustained.

Because let me tell you what college campuses look like in 2026.

There are around sixty thousand students at Ohio State.

Statistically, they are the least religious generation we have on record. A huge number of current students were not raised in faith or faith community of any kind.

Plenty of the ones who were raised in faith now hold it at arm's length. It's a part of them but not something they are focused on in their daily lives.

But that doesn't mean that students want nothing to do with faith.

Talk to students for ten minutes and you'll hear it. They want to belong somewhere. They want to believe there is good in the world when there seems to be so much wrong with it. They want their life to add up to something, and they want the world to be better because they were in it. They are hungry for something larger than themselves. They just have no words for it, or no structure to understand this longing.

Students are the church's modern equivalent to the woman at the well. Standing at the well thirsty, without being able to name what they are thirsty for. And in Columbus, at the well of Ohio state's campus We have sixty thousand longing for a drink.

Here's the part that should concern us Presbyterians. They are not walking around campus untouched by religion. Christianity is enormously present at Ohio State, and enormously well-funded. There are groups with staff, and marketing, and budgets for just their welcome week programming that dwarf Jacob's Porch's entire annual budget.

A lot of what gets preached on campus is a gospel that doesn't align with our reformed faith. A gospel that asks... Are you in or are you out. A faith that lists all of the things about you that God cannot tolerate. A faith that tells you who is to blame.

And underneath a good deal of it runs a theology that has made its peace with power, that tells students the way things are is the way God set them up, and that the people on the bottom belong on the bottom.

They are not creating a space for students to share their stories and see how it aligns with God's, They are creating a space where students are told what their story is and how who they are doesn't fit into God's story.

A student encounters that, decides that must be what Christianity is, and walks away from faith forever. And who could blame them.

They went looking for living water and got handed a bucket with a hole in it.

This is the gap Jacob's Porch stands in.

We are an ecumenical and collaborative community of Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Episcopalians built as a ministry so that outsiders to faith are welcomed as an insider. So that the kid who grew up in a Presbyterian pew and the kid who has never once considered that faith might be an option for them sit on the same couch, and neither of them has to pretend they are something they are not.

Nobody gets asked what they believe as a prerequisite before they're allowed to sit down. Nobody gets a test. They are invited to share, and somebody actually listens to the answer.

That is not a soft version of the gospel. That is the gospel. It is what Jesus does at the well.

He meets a woman who is outside every boundary that mattered to his people, He hears her story, he tells her the truth about her own life without shaming her for it, and he offers her water that doesn't run out.

We have something to say to those students. We really do. We come from a tradition that says God's grace comes first and comes free, that grace is not earned and cannot be revoked, that we read scripture with our history and our brains switched on, that the church is meant to be reformed and to keep on reforming. That doubt is not the opposite of faith. That God is at work in the world in ways that will always outrun our institutions.

That is water worth walking across campus for.

Notice what that woman had before she had anything else. [1:54]She had thirst. She did not ask for living water at the beginning of the conversation. She asked at the end. After somebody talked with her and got to know her. After somebody let her argue. After somebody heard her out long enough that a word finally arrived for what she'd been carrying all along.

You cannot ask for water if nobody has told you it exists.

That's why we do campus ministry. That's why Taylor and the pastors at Jacob's Porch put a couch on the oval. The listening is not the warm-up. The listening is the ministry.

And then Jesus sends her. He doesn't keep the story. She had been listened to, and so she could speak.

When we offer living water to students, those students go on to share the story the rest of their lives.

After worship we will hold a gathering in Palmer Hall for anybody who wants to hear more about our campus ministry and our campaign to permanently fund that campus ministry.

If you can't join you can go to OSUKIRK.org to learn more

But whether or not you come, take this with you.

I believe we all are here in church because somebody once sat with you long enough that you could name what you were thirsty for. A pastor. A grandmother. A stranger who had no obligation to stay. That is why you are in this room.

May we hear Christ's call to go and be that for somebody else. And when you find yourself at the well with someone you were taught to walk past, ask them for a drink first.

May it be so, in your life and in mine, until all have found the living waters...

Amen.