

A Sermon for 3Lent

Sunday, March 23, 2014 – John 4:5-42

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"... and he will give you living water."

I always feel it is a special blessing to hear the words, and life, and good news of Jesus Christ from the Gospel According to John. This is the Gospel with long conversations...with paradox and metaphor and contrast...all of which beckon the listener to think and participate *inside* the stories. This is the Gospel, unlike the Synoptics of Matthew, Mark and Luke, where we hear Jesus refer to himself as the incarnation of God – God made man – fully human and fully divine. "I am the true vine," he says. "I am the light of the world...I am the bread of life...I am the resurrection and the life...I am the giver of living water."

Jesus meets a woman at the well, and there begins a story we feel we have known for a long, long time. Jesus has wandered into 'enemy territory' and asks a woman whose background is so often interpreted as sordid for a drink of water. So many, many taboos have been violated here – and all of them by Jesus. This is *not* the story of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus – a man of stature among the Jews, a *man* of stature among the Jews, who chose to seek Jesus out under cover of darkness. This story is the mirror opposite – the photographic negative – of the Nicodemus story. There are Samaritans, a woman alone, a well on foreign soil, at noonday. And yet it is here that Jesus tells a woman – a woman whose life he knows in every detail – that he will give her living water...water that will become, for *all* who drink it, a spring gushing up to eternal life. And all who drink will never be thirsty again.

There are so many, many ways we might live into this story that took place in the heat of the day, when a weary (human) Jesus engaged in a very intimate conversation with a woman who was...in every way...what we, in our politer parlance, call "other."

We might probe more deeply into the woman's story – trying to determine whether she was, indeed, wanton and went through husbands recklessly. Or was hers a history not uncommon in those times, when husbands died and someone had to be found to provide for her. Who knows, maybe the man with whom she lived, the one *not* her husband, was simply her brother. We might reflect on those whose plight *we* feel the need to discuss, and judge, and ostracize.

We might talk about the barriers that had grown up between the Israelites and the Samaritans...whether the Samaritans were really inferior and despicable, or whether the "we-they" paradigm we so readily construct at every turn in our own lives had evolved, for them, through a series of historical events. We could dwell on our own modern-day lists of enmities...the whole long, tiresome, split-down-the-middle list of Muslims and Christians; black, brown and white; gay and straight; Red States and Blue States; liberals and conservatives; main line denominations and fundamentalists; women and men. That list, quite sadly goes on and on.

And then there is the water. Oh, the water. Water is life-giving – and life-taking. It is powerful, majestic, and deadly. A steady, peaceful river can carve a Grand Canyon, and a steady, heavy rain can bury a city. We turn on the tap and water flows, and yet

89 percent of the world's population - 6.1 billion people - do not have ready access to clean drinking water. We are appalled at events like the Deep Water Horizon explosion that continues, four years later, to affect the life of the Gulf and all its inhabitants, yet we don't spare much thought to the stewardship of water as gift from God in creation. We are a people of the water. Not just the water that is the essence of every cell of our being, but the water of baptism, in which we die - again and again - to sin, and are raised forever with Christ to newness of life.

We might live into all these aspects of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, and I guess we just have, albeit briefly. But this week I cannot help but wonder: Why this place...this woman...this setting in the glaring light of day in a place where Jesus should not have been, speaking with a woman who never should have been approached, asking to drink from a jug that others considered unclean. Why?

The answer, I think, is not terribly complex. In fact it is radically simple. The answer? Because that is who Jesus was.

Jesus was God Incarnate - the giver of living water - did not follow the dictates of polite society - and he certainly did not engage in what others deemed acceptable behavior. Jesus shared living water with everyone!

John tells us "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us." This woman at the well was part of God's creation - part of Jesus' creation - beloved. Of *course* Jesus knew all about her, just as Jesus knows all about each and every one of us. And when *we* come before God we may as well be as forthright as the Samaritan woman, because being otherwise is certainly not going to fool the one who has known us from the beginning! Jesus didn't point out her history - her lifestyle - to shame her. Jesus stated her *circumstance* and then honored her with the gift of himself. He did not name her sin in order to marginalize her (as we are too inclined to do) but named her life and offered her the Messiah.

There is a sort of drumbeat in the wider church these days to remind us all that places of worship - such as this place in which we are blessed to gather - are exactly that: the buildings in which we come together to worship God. The church, however - the true work of the church - takes place on the margins of life...*in* the places and *with* the people who most need the message of that living water...*in* the places, sadly, where we would rather not go, to spend time with people we would rather not encounter...rather not even see.

My friend Lou, the zany, amazing 65-year-old deacon from Rockford starts her walk to Washington, D.C. next week. Hers is a life immersed with the people on the margins. The homeless, the hungry, those with chronic mental illness, and people living in persistent poverty are the ones to whom she carries the Gospel message. The ones for whom she struggles to find homes, and meals, and jobs, and dignity. The ones whose stories she will carry every step of her long, long walk. She told of facilitating a new program created to prepare people who are considered unemployable for a chance in the workplace. "I tell them, you have gifts," she said. "I treat them with respect, and I let them know I have high expectations of them, because they can't go on believing what they have been told all their lives...that they are failures. And then," Lou said, "*I love them to a higher level of being - every day.*"

Jesus spoke his gift to the woman at the well, and she left her water jug and ran to share the Good News...to share it with a village that quite likely treated her with scorn...to share the gift of God's love. And the people believed her, and went to meet Jesus themselves. And the Gospel story began to grow, fed by streams of living water. There, on the margins of polite society and acceptable behavior, they believed.

And so we come to our place of worship...to sing praises to the God who gives such gifts...to offer thanksgiving that we are now, and evermore shall be, the recipients of God's unconditional love for each and every one of us. We confess that which we know about ourselves, understanding full well that God already knows. God knows, and God still loves us abundantly and unconditionally. In fact, if we just let it happen, God loves each of us into a higher level of being every day! In the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, we drink again of the living water that flows without ceasing.

In another church last Sunday, the very last line of the bulletin said this: "Our worship is over. Our service begins." My prayer is that we, like the Samaritan woman, like Lou, run out into the rest of our lives, carrying in our hearts, in our actions, in our conversations, in our hand a bit of this living water to share – a bit of the Good News to spread around – a bit of God's breathtaking love to impart to those who live on our own margins. Whatever path you find to shelter the homeless, or feed the hungry, or walk with the ostracized, or love someone you would rather despise, Christ has already walked there and walks with you still. Love someone to a higher level of being...and the love of God's living water will fall like gentle rain on us all.