

The Episcopal Church in the Pemi-Baker Valley

3rd Sunday in Lent

19 March 2017

Both the first reading and the long gospel for this morning talk about water, water as a symbol of God's grace and compassion. In the Gospel of John, we find Jesus, tired and thirsty, stopping at a well in the midst of his journey north towards Galilee. From the Book of Exodus, we hear that "*the whole congregation of the Israelites,*" frustrated, tired and seemingly dying of thirst in the midst of their journeying in the wilderness, rail at their rector, Moses. Slavery in Egypt had been hard, to say the least, but it, nevertheless, provided people with security, food and water. "*Why,*" Moses, they shout, why "*did you bring us out of Egypt, to kills us...with thirst?*"

But as much as one might want to follow this common thread of water, the gospel story today is not so much about people being thirsty, as it is about Jesus' willingness and his ability to find ways to get past the walls we construct to divide ourselves from one another. And so rather than talking just about water, I want us also to think about walls, the walls that divide us from our neighbors.

One of our parishioners, writing for our Lenten Devotional Booklet, describes the scene better that I could:

"It is noon in Samaria. It is very hot. Jesus, weary from travel, has sent his disciples into town for food. He decides to rest by Jacobs Well. A lone woman appears with a clay jar for water and Jesus asks her for a drink. Remarkable because Jews were not supposed to speak to "unclean" Samaritans, or engage in conversation with a woman without her husband present. The woman is startled by his lack of convention, "*You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan. How can you ask me for a drink?*" But, Jesus flaunts the rules and instead of insisting on a drink, engages her in conversation.

Our woman at the well is both startled and curious. Jesus offers her "*living water*" to quench her spiritual thirst. But, she's not buying it. So, Jesus persists, determined to be in relationship. He even reveals to her that he knows all about her. She has been married five times and is sharing a bed with a man who is not her husband, sinful behavior. But does Jesus shame her? Question her shady past? Just the opposite. He is kind and listens with respect. He reveals to her that he is the Messiah and asks her to follow him!

"Overjoyed, she left her water and went back into town urgins her neighbors, "*Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?*"

There are many layers to unpack in this story [wrote our parishioner]. For me, she writes, the most salient message, and the one most relevant to our lives today, is about being in relationship. Jesus the humanitarian disavows worldly conventions. With acceptance and kindness, he builds a true and transformative relationship with a most unlikely person. Through his actions Jesus even provides us a blueprint for relationship building. We must be willing to reach out to the other, to the estranged, without shaming or judgment. We must listen with an open heart and kindness, acknowledging the hurt and pain others are experiencing. We must attempt to seek common ground, and we must persevere. Now more than ever, in our divisive world, there is an urgency for relationship building. It is not comfortable to seek out relationships with those of different political persuasions or cultural backgrounds. Let alone with kindness and respect. But if we are to be in right relationship with one another and begin the work of building a kinder more compassionate world, we have no choice. Jesus has shown us the way." [Lynn Tyler]

To the surprise of our woman at the well, this strange man doesn't avoid her, or ignore her, or even speak harshly to her. Instead, Jesus asks for a drink and in so doing breaks Jewish religious law, social taboos and cultural conventions. Jewish men of the first century, to say nothing of rabbis, didn't strike up conversations with unknown women in broad daylight. To do so would have been to commit both religious and sexual misconduct. But more than that, this woman was a Samaritan, a foreigner, a member of a hated people, with whom good Jews would have no contact.

Jews and Samaritans, we need to recall, were both descendants of the congregation of Israel led by Moses to the Holy Land. But in the 8th century BC, Samaria had been overrun by the Assyrians, who intermarried with its population creating a half-breed people unacceptable to good Jews of the south. Two hundred years later, when the Jews returned from Exile, it was the Samaritans in the north who tried to stop the Jews from rebuilding Jerusalem and creating a rival Jewish state.

Jews and Samaritans shared a common ancestry, but each claimed to be the only true descendants of Abraham. Samaritans worshipped on Mt Gerizim in Samaria; Jews worshipped on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Despite their past (or perhaps because of it), Jews and Samaritans had come to share nothing in common; they were unreconciled.

Mark Harris, an Episcopal priest and friend, has suggested that when Jesus' disciples ventured into that Samaritan village to buy lunch, they were unlikely to see an Episcopal Church-style sign that said "*The Samaritan Temple Welcomes You.*" No, more likely they were to find a walled-city, fortified to keep the Jews out. And if that village had survived to the present, it would be located within the city limits of Nablus, approximately fifty miles north of Jerusalem in the middle of the West Bank. And its ancient walls have now been replaced by a new twenty-foot high, concrete barrier, famous wall that divides modern day Jews from their Palestinian neighbors.

Strong walls do not always make for good neighbors, and walled enclaves are not particularly welcoming.

Notice, though, how Jesus gets beyond this wall. He dares to do the unthinkable. He, a man, a Jew, makes himself vulnerable to a woman, a foreigner, one of his nation's enemies. He asks her for a drink. Now to ask something of one's enemy is to give them power over you. And to ask for even something as insignificant as a cup of cold water, is to risk being refused, rebuffed, denied. But more than that, to ask this foreign woman to share her bucket, to drink from her dipper, was the height of intimacy. "Sharing food and drink at that time was considered such an intimate act that eating and drinking could be shared only with those with whom one was in perfect agreement on all matters. It had nothing to do with germs. They didn't know about germs. It had everything to do with religion, class and assumed position in God's order of things." (Julian Gordy)

This story, as preserved late in the first century in Christian community in which John wrote his gospel, is full of irony. Jesus asks for water, yet it is the woman who is thirsty - but who cannot say for what. She mockingly asks the one we know to be "*the King of kings and Lord of lords*" if he is somehow superior to their common ancestor Jacob, who dug the well. They discuss whether it is better to worship on her nearby mountain or on Jerusalem's Mt. Zion, and Jesus says "*the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.*" John's first readers knew this irony, for by the time this gospel was written the temple in Jerusalem had already been destroyed for at least a quarter century. Still it's not irony that I would have us focus on today, but walls, the walls we create and maintain to make ourselves feel safe or right, or righteous.

Jesus found ways to create openings through the walls that people construct to separate “*our kind*” from theirs. He did it by becoming vulnerable, by taking the risk of breaking religious taboos and cultural expectations. And somehow in the course of this unlikely conversation, the tone shifts. The woman senses that his awareness of her people, her past, her sexual history, does not come with the usual condemnation.

And with that opening, they could discuss the things that separate them. When she raises their divide over the proper place for worship, he shares with her the insignificance of that issue: true worship has nothing to do with location or what building you worship in. It has nothing to do with denomination. It has everything to do with giving one’s life totally to God, worshiping not the building but the God who is Spirit, the God who is truth, with a radical spirit of truthfulness, no matter what that truth says about us.

Most all of us can recall the image of President Ronald Reagan, standing defiantly at a microphone in front of the Berlin Wall, that symbol of division and separation (the symbol of the self-assurance on either side of the wall that “we were right.” He shouted “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” The wall later came down, but it wasn’t that one-sided declaration that brought it about.

And today, the President of the United States cannot say to the Arab World, “Stop hating us.” Likewise, neither you nor I can insist that someone with whom we have experienced estrangement tear down whatever it is that divides us. No, reconciliation begins not with declarations, but with gracious steps, with our willingness to be vulnerable to the other, with our daring to make the first move.

How will we, living in the West, overcome the animosity, the distrust and fear that divides us from the Muslim world? It won’t come by our declaring that our worldview is superior to theirs. And I doubt that it will come about through the use of military might, despite the importance of confronting the despicable rule of tyrants like the so-called Islamic State. No, but it could occur when people move outside of their own comfort zone and risk the vulnerability of asking simply to talk, to converse, perhaps even asking the advice of the other side.

Jesus created an opening in the walled separation of two peoples divided by a religion they shared in common. And he found it in the intimacy of a simple drink of water and his promised gift of the *living water* of his presence, his love and acceptance that can change lives.

Who are the people in your life with whom a divide exists, the ones we keep on the other side of some wall of separation? Are they people who have offended us? Are they people whose political views differ from or? Or are they people who are just simply different from us? Who might it be that needs the refreshing water of your welcome, your forgiveness, your acceptance?

We, who are often estranged and divided one from one another, would do well to follow example of the one who came to a crossroads and dared to ask a foreigner for a drink.

Amen.