

The Third Sunday in Lent
March 19, 2017
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-52

I'm not sure how many of you have met Grace Mokiwa from Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania. She was our special guest here last weekend, the preacher at our morning services and the speaker at our weekly forum between the morning services in Brooks Hall. There have been one or two other gatherings with her since then.

And if you've not yet met her, we're having a fundraiser dinner here later this evening.

Celine "and her lovely husband Dick Burke" (as Grace described him last week) have known Grace and her husband, the bishop there, for a long time. Celine and Dick have been helping raise money to provide wells and clean drinking water for the villages there. They invited Grace to come here to tell us why the need is so great and to help us understand the difference clean, accessible water – something we take for granted – can make in the lives of whole communities.

Grace teaches gender studies back in Tanzania. And she's been teaching us here, as well. At the forum presentation last week, she explained that girls don't perform in school as well as boys do. It's the girls and women, you see, who collect the water the family needs – even if it means walking five miles to find the water and then carrying very heavy load back again. A girl who wants to get to school on time might get up very early for the task, but that same ambition to succeed might oblige her to travel alone and leave her vulnerable to assaults and rape.

It's kind of a shame Grace preached here last Sunday, and not this morning. Recalling what she has said to us about how vital it is to be able to access clean water, perhaps we sit up and notice that the stories we've just heard – the one about Moses striking a rock in the desert to release water there and the one about Jesus meeting a woman at a well to offer her living water ... these are stories of life and death. Water is not something to take for granted.

And maybe the stories Grace has told us about the uneven way responsibilities and chores are handed out in Tanzania – and the particular risks and challenges that face girls and women there – remind us that the ways we live and move in our world is not a universal experience.

The reminder may help us see things this morning we might otherwise skip over.

For starters, of course, there's the obvious fact that today's gospel is the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. Her being a woman is not merely an incidental detail. Mindful that there are still places where it's not safe for a girl or a woman to go collect water alone, we hear about a woman going out to the well at noon, expecting to be alone, only to discover this man waiting for her there. She'd have been right to be wary, suspicious, on her guard ... even fearful.

And then this man, lurking at the well at noon, speaks to her. He asks her for a drink of water. To our ears, maybe it sounds innocent enough. But her reaction makes it clear that it doesn't seem innocent to her. There were only two circumstances in which men spoke to women directly and in public like this only if (a) they're related by blood or (b) as a proposition.

Even in 21st century America, there are surely still times when a woman, alone, should be wary, suspicious, on her guard. And if a man were to approach her at such a time, even an apparently innocent request might understandably seem hostile to a woman who feels vulnerable.

If she comes across as hostile, Jesus seems not to have taken offense. Instead, he takes even an apparently antagonistic response from her as an invitation to enter into a deeper conversation. And so it is that he – a Jew, a man, a rabbi – enters into theological discourse with her – a Samaritan, a woman, a nobody. (And they stay with it, the two of them. The reading seemed long enough to us for a Sunday morning, but our text must surely be an abridged version of what would have been a longer conversation. Jesus and this woman put time and thought into the give and take of a real conversation.)

It may have been the first time in her life that any man had ever have taken her seriously and talked with her this way, respecting her enough to allow her to challenge him and caring enough to respond.

The real turning point in their conversation happens when Jesus brings up the topic of her husband. She tells him that she has no husband, of course, opening up the door for Jesus:

You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.

We should tread carefully here though. It's clear that this is a sensitive issue for the woman, but it isn't necessarily quite so clear why. We assume more than we know about her.

A lot of baggage has been dumped on her because of this one line from Jesus. Preachers have referred to her as a harlot or a whore, maligning her for her wanton ways, suggesting that it's a good thing Jesus came along when he did to rescue her from a life of sin and immorality. Down through the centuries, a lot of people – men, it seems safe to say – have continued to mistreat her, reinforcing the reasons why women should be wary and on their guard.

The most likely explanation is that she was abandoned five times – left behind by five husbands in death, perhaps, or maybe more likely tossed aside by them in divorce (presumably for failing to bear a child). Living in a society that bartered women as property, she'd have had no say in whether she might stay married or be divorced. And so, according to the customs of the day, she might be living with family members who had taken her in but refused to provide for her a husband. All of which is to say that her story is plausibly tragic rather than scandalous.

Notice that Jesus never tells her to repent. He never speaks of her sins or her sinful life. And he never offers forgiveness, as if that's what she needs to put her life back on track. As biblical scholar Karoline Lewis puts it, "This isn't a woman who needs forgiveness. This is a woman who needs acceptance. She needs relationship. She needs belonging."ⁱ

And that, of course, is what Jesus gives her. He sees her. He sees HER, as she truly is – and perhaps as no one before him has ever bothered to do before – and he cares for HER. Jesus sees the depth and darkness of her pain and promises to quench this thirst in her for belonging.

And if we see her this way, I think we hear the question she asks next more urgently. If Jesus exposes the woman's sordid past, her follow-up question about where people must go to worship may be nothing more than a clumsy attempt to change the subject. But if Jesus is offering a safe space to a woman who has long been too easily tossed aside, then her question to this man she now sees as a prophet gets to the core of it all for her – and for all of us, still. Is there any hope for us in the face of all that separates us, one from another?

To which Jesus says, in essence, there is hope:

... the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter.

It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people [God] is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves ... in their worship.

John 4:23 (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*)

In the end, this is a story about all that separates us, one from another – race, religion, gender, status, at the least. And it's a story about the one who comes in our midst to show us and to offer us another way to live together. Writing about this story more than 20 years ago, commentator Charles Cousar lamented that we find it so much easier to build walls than we do to follow the way Jesus shows us that longs to tear them down.ⁱⁱ

We were privileged to hear Grace Mokiwa speak with us last Sunday. She came a long way to speak to us. This Sunday, we are privileged to hear another woman speak. She, too, came a long way to speak to us – across time and distance. They both remind us that the world is not always a safe place. And yet they have come to us from a long way away to rejoice with us that there is another way for us to live.

And for that reason, though the woman in this morning's gospel is never named, I think I'll call her Grace, too – maybe even, "Amazing Grace."

ⁱ Karoline Lewis on "Sermon Brainwave" (Episode #530) @ http://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=859.

ⁱⁱ Charles Cousar (*Texts for Preaching*, 1995), p. 208, cited @ <http://www.pulpitfiction.us/show-notes/211-lent-3a-3192017>.