

John 4:5-26(27-38)39-42

March 15, 2020

So he came to a Samaritan city call Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" And then in parentheses, the Gospel goes on to say. Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.

Jesus is traveling through Samaria, a land populated by Samaritans, whom the Judeans despised. This ancient animosity was fueled by blame and scapegoating, and had its origins in the destruction of the temple by Babylonians in 586 BCE. So, it was centuries old by the time Jesus sat by Jacob's well at the beginning of our story today, and was approached by a woman of Samaria.

Our Gospel story tells us it was noon. Far after the time most of the women of the village would have come to do the heavy lifting of drawing water to haul back to their homes. Those women would have come earlier in the day, when the difficult task would have been lessened by the camaraderie of conversation and gossip around the well. That is why there is speculation that the woman with whom Jesus has this encounter is an outcast in her village. She avoids the company of the other woman, coming later in the day and by herself to the well. But instead of being alone, she encounters Jesus. And this chance encounter changes her life.

Looking back at our story from last week, we see a stark contrast between Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus and the one from our story today. -- Nicodemus is male, Jewish, and a religious authority (an "insider") and the Samaritan woman is none of those. However, both Nicodemus and the woman have a provocative conversation with Jesus. As a side note, it is interesting to note, that in the case of Nicodemus, we are not sure at the end of our reading that his conversation had any impact on him at the time. However, that is not the case with the

Samaritan woman. In her exchange with Jesus she realizes that he knows who she really is. He looks into her soul, and without judging her, he receives her as part of his group, an intimate who has no cause for shame. He brings up her past, the fact that she has had five husbands, and her present, that she is living with a man who is not her husband, not to shame her, but to take away the power of these indiscretions. And through this acceptance he shows her how little those actions affect how Jesus and the God he proclaims will accept her. She is welcome with all her baggage and what has happened in her past. And in that moment, she knows that this man is a prophet and she leaves her water jar, and runs back to the village to tell all who will listen what she has heard and seen. And the people in her village listen to her. She has been given a new life, and to harken back to last week's Gospel, she has been allowed to be 'born again' into a new life of sense of self and community.

Later, in our story, during Jesus' exchange with the woman, his disciples return and they can not believe that he is speaking to this woman. But she leaves shortly thereafter, to run off to her community to proclaim her new knowledge. The disciples, then try to get Jesus to eat something. But Jesus responds to their offer of food the same way he responded to the woman's offer of water. He tells them what he told the woman; that food and water are not the most essential elements of life. When the woman offers him water she encounters the living water of life with God, and when the disciples offer him food we are reminded that the 'bread of life' is to do God's work. Both the woman and the disciples hear Jesus say that beyond mere food and water there is something far more crucial and important to human life. And that is human connection. Jesus knows that humans need to belong and when they feel alienated and separated from the love of others and community, it is difficult for them to feel the love of God.

In a study published in *The Atlantic* in 2013, Matthew Lieberman, a distinguished social psychologist and neuroscientist is quoted, saying,

Just as human beings have a basic need for food and shelter and water , we also have a basic need to belong to a group and form relationships. The desire to be in a loving relationship, to fit in at school, to join a fraternity or sorority, to avoid rejection and loss, to see your friends do

well and be cared for, to share good news with your family, to cheer on your sports team; these things motivate an incredibly impressive array of our thoughts, actions, and feelings. And he ends the article with these words. Our Social connections are as important to our survival and flourishing as the need for food, safety, and shelter. But over the last fifty years, while society has been growing more and more prosperous and individualistic, our social connections have been dissolving. We volunteer less. We entertain guests at our homes less. More of us are remaining unmarried. We are having fewer children. And we have fewer and fewer close friends with whom we'd share the intimate details of our lives. We are increasingly denying our social nature, and paying a price for it. Over the same period of time that social isolation has increased, our levels of happiness have gone down, while rates of suicide and depression have multiplied.

The truth is, we need each other. We need to trust, rely and depend on one another. God gave us each other to walk alongside, encourage, spur one another in love. We are to carry each other's burdens, care for each other's practical needs, and rejoice with each other. That is what Jesus gives to the Samaritan woman; a sense of her own worth and an opportunity to become connected once again to her community.

As Christians, we need to see the transformational possibilities in each person we encounter. As we learn about each person, as we really begin to see each one as a child of God, we offer an opportunity for that person to be transformed. Jesus made a difference in peoples' lives throughout his ministry. Many of those stories are as transformational to those people as this story about the Samaritan woman. And, I believe that is due to the fact that Jesus really 'sees' these people. He sees beyond their mistakes and transgressions and into their hearts. And through that 'seeing' he allows them to see a new vision of themselves and a new hope and we have the opportunity every day to do the same.

With our increasing awareness of the dangers of the Coronavirus I leave you with this suggestion written by Rabbi Mona Alfi:

Every hand that we don't shake must become a phone call that we place.

Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other should the need arise.