

Third Sunday of Lent
February 24, 2008
Rev. Susan J. Morrison

John 4:1-30; 39-42

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

⁴But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestors Leah and Rachel and Jacob, who gave us the well, and with their descendants and flocks drank from it?” ¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth. Indeed, it is just such worshippers whom God seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

³⁹Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they asked him to stay with them; and Jesus stayed there two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

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During this season of Lent we are meeting people whose lives were touched by Jesus. Our purpose is not just to learn more about Jesus and the people in his life, but rather that these biblical encounters will help us recall how Jesus has touched our lives, or how he might yet touch our lives. At the end of each of these Lenten sermons, I have promised to give you a chance to share your testimony – to briefly recount a time when Jesus touched your life and how it has made a difference. I hope that throughout this past week, you’ve all been more aware of those moments in your day when Jesus’ Spirit has touched your life.

Last Sunday we met Nicodemus who was curious, confused and converted. Today we have met the Samaritan woman at the well. This turns out to be a story of scandal, self discovery and salvation.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes that Jesus talks longer to the woman at the well than he does to anyone else in all the gospels. In this morning’s lesson he talks to her longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his accusers, longer than he talks to any of his own family. She is the first person he reveals himself to in the Gospel of John. She is the first outsider to guess who he is and to tell others, making her the first evangelist. Her testimony brings many to faith. (*Christian Century*, Feb.12, 2008, p. 19)

Why is this story scandalous? It is because this woman at the well is a triple outsider. First of all, she is a Samaritan and Samaritans and Jews considered each other “the enemy.” Back when Assyria conquered Samaria in 722 BC, many Jews from Samaria intermarried their captors. The whole story is told in 1 Kings 17. They also believed, as was noted in today’s gospel lesson, that God should be worshipped on Mt. Gerazim in Samaria, not in Jerusalem where the Jews had built the temple.

Besides being a Samaritan, she is also a woman. Remember, in Jesus time, women were second class citizens. They were not allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions included the prayer: “Blessed are you, O Lord, Our God, King of the Universe that I was not born a woman.” In fact, Jewish rabbis did not speak to women in public. Such action would render a Jew unclean.

The woman at the well is a triple outsider. She was a Samaritan; she was a woman; and she was a fallen woman. Respectable women made their trips to the well at the break of day. It was cool and the right time to collect water for the day’s cooking and cleaning. Early morning was the politically correct time to gather at the well. Showing up at noon was a sure sign that this unnamed woman was not welcome at the morning social hour. As we find out later in the story, she in fact had been married many times and was currently committing adultery by living with a man.

Perhaps now you can understand how much Jesus risked by choosing to engage in conversation with this thrice cursed woman. She certainly recognizes it when she says to him “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Interestingly, she never does give Jesus a drink of water. It is Jesus who ends up offering her, his enemy, the gift of living water – the gift of himself – that which will give her abundant life from that moment on and forever.

Friends, we’re talking about radical hospitality. In Jesus, we’re meeting a God who loves unconditionally. This God crosses into enemy territory and embraces the most hated enemy with acceptance. This God breaks down barriers between men and women, whites and blacks, Christians and Muslims, heterosexuals and homosexuals, rich and poor, clean and unclean and offers salvation and abundant life to all. To quote St. Paul, “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither bond nor free, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” This God knows all about us. Since we were knit together in our mother’s womb, this God claims us and loves us, warts and all. This God sees us with “x-ray” vision. This God doesn’t need MRI’s or ultrasounds to detect the innards of our lives. This God knows everything about us. God knows our shortcomings and our sins. And this God is ready and willing to forgive us and to offer us eternal life. That is the kind of radical hospitality that our God offers us through Jesus Christ.

Nine years ago, almost to the day, I stood with my family at the graveside of our Andover neighbor and good friend, Janos Vajda. Janos had been murdered in cold blood in a hospital room in Methuen by the estranged husband of the woman he was dating. It was a horrific event – a death that never should have happened. Because Janos’ family of origin was Hungary where all of his relatives still lived, his ex-wife and 3 daughters had made all of the funeral arrangements. They were Christians. Janos was a Jew. A rabbi officiated at the graveside service and we listened to prayers and scripture read both in English and Hebrew.

And then we were invited to join together in the saying of the 23rd Psalm. I didn’t have to look at my little memorial program for the words. I closed my eyes and prayed with the other mourners.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name sake.
Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me.
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

And then came the line that made me stumble over the words. It was as if I choked on it as I spoke.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

And there, right beside that grave, I painfully understood the practice of radical hospitality. Even Janos’ enemy, his murderer, was welcome at the banqueting table because God, who is a gracious host, prepares a table that reconciles enemies and offers life to all.

How hard it is for us to grasp the implications of radical hospitality. Would it not turn our personal lives around if we practiced loving our enemies? Would it not turn the world upside down if we found ways to love the enemy, tolerating differences and embracing restorative justice instead of retribution? Several weeks ago I read a touching article in The Boston Globe. Ani Nalbandian and her sister Armine were interviewed about the death of their mother, Diruhi Mattian. Perhaps you remember the story about Diruhi, a clinical social worker who was slain in North Andover while paying a house call on a client?

Her daughters talked about their mother’s life, faith and spirit of forgiveness. An immigrant from Armenia, Diruhi had become a social worker in midlife. She worked 70 to 80 hours a week, always taking Sundays off for church. Her daughters were sure that their mother would forgive the man who killed her. Although he must and should be punished for his crime, he is surely in pain, Diruhi’s daughters concluded. The best way to honor our mother’s memory is to forgive as she would have forgiven. In their compassion they find strength.

In this morning’s gospel lesson it is Jesus who shows us how to be compassionate, how to love our enemy. He offers radical hospitality, not just to his own people, the Jews, but to Gentiles, to Samaritans, to the whole world. Remember last week’s scripture and anthem? “For God so loved the world that God gave an only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3: 16 – 17)

It’s to his enemy that Jesus announces “I am the Messiah.” And he offers this Samaritan woman “living water.”

Now she, like Nicodemus, isn't able to fully comprehend Jesus' words. Like with Nicodemus, they talk past one another. Jesus speaks in spiritual metaphors. She speaks with concrete and logical words. "How can you give me living water when you don't even have a bucket?" she asks Jesus. She doesn't understand that the water that Jesus offers her can't be contained in a bucket. It's the gift of living water, the gift of abundant life, the gift of himself!

I think that her moment of transformation comes when she leaves her water jar by the well and runs to tell others about this prophet, Jesus. She is so excited, so filled with the Spirit of the living water that Jesus has given her, that she no longer cares about collecting water from the well. She has been touched by Jesus and has within her "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

It's important to note that Jesus' radical hospitality doesn't end with her conversion. Soon we find that his word so touches other Samaritans in her city that he is invited to stay with them for two nights. Now it is the enemy who prepares bed and breakfast for Jesus offering him hospitality that knows no bounds.

Meeting the people who were touched by Jesus leads us to our own Samarias and reminds us of our own Samaritans. How does this story speak to each of us? Perhaps we can ask - Where are our Samarias? Who are our Samaritans? As a congregation, how do we offer radical hospitality to those who come here to worship? Do we treat guests and newcomers with respect? Do we treat one another with acceptance? Will we take seriously our new Relational Covenant and let it inform the practice of radical hospitality in our personal lives as well as in our life as a congregation?

I hope that this morning's journey with Jesus will allow our thirsts to be quenched by living water and that we, in turn, can offer that living water to others. And as we find our own Samarias and face the Samaritans in our lives, may we have the courage like that of Jesus, to disregard old patterns and to let our enemy take their place at the table. For it is when we, too, can prepare a table and include our enemies, that our cup will runneth over and goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

And now for your testimonies! How has Jesus touched your life recently?