Third Sunday in Lent March 19, 2017

All Saints’ Church Year A

Exodus 17:1-7 Romans 5:1-11

Psalm 95 John 4:5-42

Dear Lord, we pray, create in us clean hearts. Amen

Nobody draws water from a well at high noon. Nobody.

You go in the cool of the early morning as the sun is rising or in the evening as the sun is setting. If the well is connected to a village, which they all are- in fact, a sign of a flourishing village is to have a functioning well- then it’s social hour, especially in the morning, the fresh start to a new day.

The women of the village gather, no man would be there, and they are connecting: talking about the chores of the past day, the ones to come, the worry over children, husbands, the crops, the cattle, maybe gossiping a bit. Depending on where the well is (it could be a long walk), you travelled together, often with babies strapped to your back.

When I was living in the African village of Phoela, I enjoyed these morning walks to the well and the conversations: how much could you water down clothes detergent and not lose its effect; what combination of herbs best heal a cut; what are we going to do about the sighting of that poisonous snake?

Well gatherings are about connecting, compassionate listening, loving, belonging, laughing, crying, revealing concerns, all ingredients of “whole hearted living”[[1]](#footnote-1) a term sociologist Brene’ Brown has coined to describe the courage of bringing and revealing your full heart to this thing we call living.

Our unnamed woman comes alone, isolated, ostracized, cut apart from the fabric of living in community. We learn later from Jesus that she has been married five times and the man she is living with now is not her husband. Whether she was an agent in these divorces, in these living arrangements, something I doubt, or a victim of being used, abused and discarded, she is full of shame and self-loathing, even if she appears sassy and smart and defended.

She meets Jesus at high noon at the well. This is the first time she has ever met anyone in the direct light of a hot sun, and a man at that, and even more shocking, a Jew, who has the audacity to ask her for water.

How is it that Jesus is there? Well, Jesus has done one of his Jesus-like things…. instead of walking around the walled off despised region of Samaria, the geographical area between Judea and Galilee, he is walking straight into the middle of it. No one does that.

Samaritans are hated and avoided by the Jews at all costs, for lots of reasons:

* they built a rival temple to the one in Jerusalem;
* they accepted only the first five books of the Torah to be true Scripture;
* they were a mixed breed, intermarrying with foreigners and heathens; and
* they refused to keep kosher or to follow certain Jewish rituals

Foreigners! Enemies! Terrorists! Yet, Jesus is always redeeming the Samaritans, challenging our fear of strangers (*xenophobia*), to become our love of strangers (*philonexia*). Notice it’s the Samaritan who saves the life of the Jew left to die on the side of the road, defining for us what it means to be neighborly; it’s the Samaritan who after the ten lepers are cleansed, is the only one to return to give Jesus thanks, defining for us what it means to be grateful and generous; and now it’s a Samaritan woman who engages with Jesus in one of the most playful, yet profound theological discussion in the gospels, defining for us what happens when you trust in giving your heart to faith and love.

Jesus is tired. No wonder- he is taking great risks to walk into unchartered, forbidden territory. He sends the disciples off to find some food and goes to a place of seclusion- the well at noon- to rest, to pray, to be alone, to avoid everybody and to regain some strength, maybe even courage.

But that plan is ruined; I am somehow encouraged to see that God who often steps in to disrupt our well designed plans, does the same thing to Jesus. I can almost hear Jesus sighing, who thought he was going to be alone, yet he recognizes immediately that God has given him this encounter and he is going to enter into it with his full heart, sharing with his “supposed sworn enemy” the living waters that will quench all eternal thirsts.

The turning point in this story is when Jesus says, “Go call your husband and come back,” and the woman replies with a half-truth, “I have no husband.”

She has revealed so much, risked so much to have this conversation with this Jew, this stranger, this enemy; she’s not going to bring her whole self to him, expose her deepest pain, make herself vulnerable to him and lose the little bit of self-respect she is desperately holding onto.

How many times do we do the same thing in our own prayer life? You want all of me Jesus? Do you really want me to admit as honestly as I can all the ways that I have faltered and sinned and messed up? Really? Can’t I keep just this one thing secret, so I can at least hold on to something safe and secure about my self-worth, even if it’s not the full truth.

“Nothing doing,” says Jesus. He loves and reveals this woman’s full pain, yet instead of being defeated, she is liberated and becomes the first great evangelizer of the good news, moving her whole community to trust in her experience and to bring them to Jesus so that they can have their own authentic experience of the Real Deal.

Many of you last week, when Pastor Joel was here, with Leslie, Alfonso, and Angelita, shared with me, “He’s the Real Deal.” He stood in front of us on the steps of this chancel and shared with us, “I was hurt, badly and often, and I hurt others back, as much as I had been hurt.”

And then he revealed with his full heart all of his pain to the Lord, and he was transformed and became a child-whisperer, bringing hurting kids under the wings of his love and God’s love, helping them to claim their lives so much that they too can say, “It’s no longer because of what you say, Pastor Joel, that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Our own children and youth and young adults could hardly wait for Pastor Joel to arrive and were so pleased to be given the opportunity to share with us why creating these bonds of love across borders matter.

And each one of them, without failure, even though they did not discuss what they were sharing with each other, spoke about the feelings of being loved, unconditionally. They all shared about being overwhelmed when 80+ children came running to them, calling out their name and throwing themselves onto them. Our own youth recognized that these children, strangers to them, and abandoned, lost, deemed unworthy by society, had created a new family, a new way of being, and were liberated, and were drinking in living waters that quenched all thirsts. And they were inviting our children in, giving them the same water of life. And our children were overwhelmed by this gift, a gift they didn’t know they needed.

There’s something contagious about encounters of deep unconditional love. Our children are well loved by their parents, no doubt, but how many times have you heard, “yeah, yeah Mom, but you have to love me, you’re my mother.”

In the arms of these strangers, these abandoned children, our own children felt the embrace of Jesus’ unconditional love. They saw Jesus; they felt Jesus, and when that happens, there is no other place to be. It’s why they traveled far to be with us last week and why they continue to return to Juarez. And they are realizing that they carry this embrace with them always, whether they are in Juarez or not. You can’t take it away. This is what we mean by “the Living Christ.”

I think this is the crux of it: when you risk loving a stranger and being loved in return, the stranger within you, who is buried deep, who is reigning shaming havoc upon you, whom we all have living within us, whom we want to keep secret, who wants to hurt or run from hurt is finally being untethered and released- disempowered. This stranger no longer has a devastating and humiliating hold on you, and you become free to be the gift of God’s dream for you.

Our own children in this experience discover that they want to create new family, to include and protect the hurting, to let go of judgment and fear and material stuff and false prestige and to now care about things that really matter- love, forgiveness, inclusion, hope and community, across all borders. The youth of Juarez are discovering that they are worthy, that they matter and that their dreams of being a pilot, an accountant, a computer programmer are essential and beautiful and that we need their life force, their power, and their capacity in our world.

When we cross borders and meet the stranger, we are transformed by love, something new is afoot for all. It’s the Christ. The well of the village, the life source, is now smack in the middle of our global village, beckoning us all to come and drink its life-giving waters. AMEN

1. Brene’ Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Minnesota: Hazelden Publishing, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)