

3 Lent, Yr. A.

March 19, 2017

Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

I'd like to concentrate this morning on the passage from John's gospel, but I'd like to frame our discussion of that passage using the lens of reconciliation Paul speaks about in Romans. Reconciliation is a prominent theme for Paul, so it's worth thinking about. Why that emphasis? We've been talking for a couple of weeks about the fact that the first part of Genesis sets out God's good creation, God's delight in that creation; God's intent for that creation. And we've also talked about how quickly human freedom caused problems. So, almost from the beginning, there was separation and alienation: between humans themselves, between humans and the rest of creation and most importantly, between humans and God. So when Paul's talking about reconciliation, he's talking about that process of knitting all those relationships back together, healing them, bringing about that new creation which will be exactly as God intended from the beginning. Paul talks about reconciliation on a cosmic level in today's passage, but, just as often, he talks about it on an earthly level – when, for instance he says there's no more Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Reconciliation, healing, building bridges, unifying that which was never meant to be divided.

With that as a backdrop, let's look at the John reading. Just to get the setting, Jesus has come from Judea and is on the way to Galilee. He's taken a shortcut and is passing through Samaria. You're heard enough sermons on this to know that this is hostile territory. This enmity goes back a long way. You'll remember that Israel had a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians in 720 B.C. and many people were taken back to Assyria and replaced with people from all over the empire. Some of the Israelites left behind inter-married with the foreign imports. The southern kingdom also fell, in 586 B.C., to the Babylonians. They, too, suffered extensive deportation. But, unlike their northern counterparts, they held fast to the faith and maintained their Jewish identity. When they were allowed back into Israel, they refused to have anything to do with their northern neighbors, the Samaritans. To use an image from Harry Potter, they saw the northerners as "muggles" – mixed bloods - and therefore, inferior. In the ordinary course of events, a Jew traveling, as Jesus was, from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, would go around Samaria.

The original readers of John's gospel would have known about this. They would have known something else, too, and that was that in the stories of the patriarchs, these meetings at wells were often, if not romantic meetings, at least meetings that led to marriages. So, this was Jacob's well, where Jacob met Rachel. There were other well stories, too: where Isaac's servant found Rebekah, and where Moses found the daughter of Jethro. So, John's readers may have been listening to this, leaning in the direction of a romantic liaison. He would have had their attention, I'm guessing. They would also have known something else that we, as modern readers might miss. A woman coming alone to a well at noon was an anomaly. It was really hot at noon. Women would have come in a group in the early morning to get their water. Something's amiss when there's a lone woman coming at noon.

So we have these two people meeting at Jacob's well. They are both the "other" in many ways—Jew and Samaritan, man and woman, Rabbi and a woman who's perhaps just a little suspect. But they meet as two people, as two human beings, who it turns out, need each other. Jesus is hot and tired and thirsty and he can't get a drink of water from the deep well by himself. So he asks her for a drink. She well knows that she's the social inferior here and that she's being asked for a favor. It would be interesting to hear her tone of voice here – "how come you're asking me for a drink" and then, when he says something about living water, her reply is something like "right, you don't even have a bucket, so where are you going to get that water? And besides that, do you think you're greater than Jacob? Please!"

In the course of the conversation it turns out that she, too, has a need. While Jesus is thirsty for water, she's thirsty for some kind of human recognition and acceptance. It's worth pointing out here that this passage often is preached as though this woman was a sinner. But that's jumping to a conclusion not supported in the text which says absolutely nothing about that. It says that Jesus knows about her five husbands and the man she's currently with. It says nothing about those five husbands: she may have been widowed or divorced or deserted because she was barren. And she could well have been in a mandated relationship where she was with a brother of a deceased husband, which might not have been counted as a marriage. And the fact that she's ostracized could have been simply because other women didn't want her bad luck to rub off on them. What she clearly is, though, is an outsider.

Both she and Jesus are out of their comfort zones in this encounter. But have you have the experience of being out of your comfort zone and, because of that, being available for totally new experiences? When I was writing this, I couldn't help but think of being in Africa when my daughter was there in the Peace Corps. I met a shaman, and an economist from Mauritius, and a missionary in Zambia – all well beyond my ordinary experience, to be sure! But all enriching experiences.

So these two people, both vulnerable human beings, strike up a conversation. It's a true conversation in that they are open to one another, they're curious about one another, interested in one another. And in that openness, there's room for acceptance and change and even delight.

From the point of view of John's theology, the mundane becomes sacramental. Well water becomes the symbol of living water. Seeing, really seeing, that is, below the surface, allows the woman to be seen as a good and valuable and beloved person and Jesus to be seen, not only as Rabbi, but as Messiah. In their conversation about the religious differences around where the true temple is, Jesus tells her that arguments over whether the temple is in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim are immaterial. True worship is done in loving lives and isn't contingent upon location. At the end of the conversation, the woman leaves her water jar and goes back to the city to tell the people about her encounter. They return with her and ask Jesus to stay with them; which he does, for two days. It's interesting to note that the words she uses to her neighbors - "come and see" - are the same words Jesus uses when he calls his first disciples. And in some traditions, this woman is remembered as the first apostle; the first person to tell the good news of the Messiah.

A first reading of this text would, I think, leave us wondering. How was it that this woman, an outsider and ostracized in her community, certainly not a “pillar” of that community, how was it that she was listened to? How was it that they came to see Jesus at her bidding, at her testimony?

And I think I know the answer to that question. When I was newly arrived in Texas, I was invited to a woman’s retreat. I had attended most of the sessions and was looking forward to skipping one afternoon session that hinted that it might include liturgical dance – not my favorite! But the woman who had put the retreat together said that I simply could not miss that session. So, somewhat reluctantly, I went. The session was about this scripture, about the woman at the well and was to be in the church. When I got there I saw a rather frumpy, middle-aged woman sitting in the sanctuary, kind of staring off into space. The only prop she had was a large clear glass bowl of water. And I noted that if there was going to be liturgical dance, it was going to be difficult at the least, because she had a cast on one of her legs that went from knee to toe. But I settled in, although a bit grumpily.

When it was time, she began. And any discomfort I had completely disappeared. We could all have been in the Samaritan village. She told the story as though she was talking to the townspeople, with all the amazement she felt about a Jewish rabbi talking to a Samaritan woman at all, let alone one in her situation. “He knew me,” she said, “he knew all about me and it didn’t matter! He told me about living water that would never leave me thirsty if I would just drink of it. I think he may be the Messiah!” And as she told the story, with rising enthusiasm and with great joy, she began to throw water from the bowl on to her listeners as a sign of blessing and of sharing and then, finally, she picked up the bowl and danced. It was glorious and delightful. And in that moment I understood why the villagers would have followed her back to Jesus.

To circle back to Paul, this passage is full of instances of reconciliation, of things being knitted back together. There is so much brokenness in our world – the need for people to be reconcilers is urgent.

Like that woman, we’ve been blessed with this living water, with the knowledge of the living Christ. And like that woman, we’re asked to acknowledge that gift and then to share it with all the gratitude and joy we feel at having received it ourselves. Amen.