

Third Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2017

John 4:5-42

Grace to you and peace...

As Lead Pastor here – among an all female staff and many strong, powerful women who are leaders (our entire Executive Committee, for example, as well as the majority of our Council) – it's easy for me to forget how women are marginalized and diminished both here in the US and around the world.

But every woman – every person who presents as apparently female – becomes familiar with a common collection of attitudes and treatment at some point in their lives.

Some of us have the privilege of being safe enough that we can forget. And, like other kinds of privilege, those of us who have it need to be reminded both to notice, and to act beyond that privilege to change the status quo.

Even with the security and privilege of this call, in this congregation where women are treated with respect and equality – it only takes a moment to remember how rarely that is true in our larger society. Not a woman I know, regardless of age, education, economic status or any other measure, has not been evaluated and critiqued based on appearance – fundamentally objectified by some (predetermined) sexual standard; by a very particular set of expectations of what is acceptable, feminine, or tolerated for women.

It's hard to enough to deal with such devaluation if you are cis-gendered, that is, your internal sense of your gender identity matches what your physical body portrays to the world. Given what we are learning about gender identity, transgender, gender-fluid, and the whole range of sexual identities and understandings, I can't even begin to comprehend how hard it must be to endure sexualized treatment unconnected to *who* you actually are. So I can only speak from what I know, and invite your imagination in applying my examples to other experiences.

In myriad ways women are evaluated (by self and society) as acceptable, or not. Too fat or too skinny; too young or too old; pretty or ugly; too smart, too loud, too assertive... From head to toe, women are evaluated and judged on their hairstyle, their make-up (or lack of it), their body proportions, clothing choices, all the way down to their shoes. Even at my internship site, where I was recognized for my preaching, I created a much greater stir among the men of the congregation by my choice of shoes for the day.

Women are still paid less than men for the same work; are still described as sluts or prudes, still held suspect when sexually assaulted, and still bought and sold as though they are sexual property. When a candidate for the highest office in the land can brag about treating women as sexual objects for his personal exploitation and be excused as "just a typical guy," when his opponent, a successful, smart, capable woman can be dismissed by that same man as a "Nasty Woman," it's no wonder there were women's marches around the country and a renewed interest in the Equal Rights Amendment for women's equality.

And though we've come a long way – it's still not so different in the church. Our Presiding Bishop is a woman, as are the bishops of the two largest synods in the ELCA – but women are still only a small percentage of the college of bishops as a whole.

Young female clergy are still judged for the way they dress, and are still patronized or poorly treated by their mostly male senior colleagues. Mature male clergy are sought after for leadership roles, while older female pastors become more and more invisible.

Even Pope Francis, who has been a breath of fresh air in the stale hierarchy of the Catholic Church, is willing to consider married men to address the shortage of priests over entertaining the possibility of ordaining women.

And I still haven't touched on the challenges faced by women in developing countries. Places where girls are denied an opportunity for education because they are relegated to the role of workhorses, walking miles to carry water for their family's survival. Or where they are still treated as male property, with no rights of their own.

I lay out these current realities because only when we acknowledge the truth of our own context are we prepared to be shocked and moved by today's powerful story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Only when we remember with specific clarity at least one example of the exclusionary barriers and discrimination that still exist are we ready to see with

fresh eyes the radical nature of God's inclusive and expansive Good News in Jesus.

It's at this point that I have to remind myself, "Only one sermon, Laurie." There is so much that takes place in this long and complex story that I can't possibly address all of it! This is a text we can return to again and again to plumb the depths of its wellspring – truly gushing up with living water! By means of this one nameless woman, herself a social and religious outsider, the gospel writer breaks open all manner of barriers and boundaries, exploding readers into a glimpse of what God is up to through Christ.

This story of the Samaritan woman follows closely on the heels of Nicodemus' night visit to Jesus that we heard last week. We are invited to notice the contrasts.

- Nicodemus came under cover of night; this conversation is set at the brightest time of daylight.
- We know Nicodemus by name, as a person of religious authority; the woman, as a Samaritan, was a religious outsider and in spite of her influence she remains nameless.
- Nicodemus starts conversation by asserting what he already knows; the woman responds to Jesus with a question.
- Nicodemus is skeptical and disbelieving of Jesus' words; the woman is curious and seeks deeper understanding.

- As far as we know, Nicodemus remained silent about his encounter with Jesus; the woman ran to tell everyone she knew.
- Nicodemus came by himself to protect his reputation; the woman is by herself fetching water in the heat of the day because her reputation in her community has made her a social outcast.
- Nicodemus heard Jesus speak the now famous passage, “God so loved the world...;” the woman *became* the embodiment of God’s love for the whole world as expressed by Jesus.

Often commentaries describe this woman as one of poor character. There is something suspect about her because she has had five husbands, and is not married to the one she now lives with. But why do we question her morality? Divorce was not an option initiated by women in those days. To be without a man was to have no identity in the community at all. It could be that the woman was unable to bear children, and thus passed from one husband to another. This could be a case of Levirate marriage, with brothers required to marry the wife of a deceased brother. In any case, both then and now, this woman bore the judgment and rejection of “good people.” The same kind of judgment and exclusion women face even today. But not from Jesus.

In this encounter Jesus broke down all the boundaries that people create to establish positions of privilege and power in society. He crossed geographic boundaries and placed himself in unfamiliar

territory. He, a respected holy man, violated social boundaries by engaging in conversation with a woman, alone. Jesus ignored purity rules (think Jim Crow) by asking to drink from a common cup. He transcended religious boundaries by pointing beyond disagreements about doctrine to point to authentic worship of God in spirit and in truth. He made no comment regarding any sin. And this woman, nameless, outcast, and suspect became the first to hear Jesus claim his identity as Messiah. "I AM," he said in response to her confession of faith in God's promises.

Real Good News broke into the Samaritan woman's broken places of isolation and grief and hard work. Jesus saw her. Engaged her. Listened to her. Knew her. And accepted her completely. He offered her a whole new way of seeing and being in the world. Jesus offered her eternal life. And that "living water" so filled her that she couldn't contain it – she had to go and tell. And by the strength of her witness a whole community came to know Jesus as the Savior of the world.

Friends, you are – we are – the privileged ones who know the Good News of God's abundant and inclusive love for all creation. Whether you come to faith in a burst of insight, like the Samaritan woman, or if you come to it slowly, cautiously, like Nicodemus, you have been washed into the living waters of baptism, the wellspring of eternal life that will not be quenched. From that place of privilege it's easy to forget the vast multitude of people who are trapped and burdened by the isolation of our constructed boundaries. But there are so many dying of thirst for a place to belong, parched with a sense of abandonment and hopelessness.

We who have witnessed the real Good News that breaks into Broken Places are called to be signs and vessels of Living Water flowing into the world for Jesus' sake.

Amen.