

Sermon: Lent 3

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 19, 2017

Year A
Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

On Ash Wednesday... I suggested that... as Lent begins... the church goes into its room... for forty days... to pray...

Last week's story about Nicodemus... invokes the image of being born again... the image of a womb... of being born again of Spirit and of water... and today... we have a well... a spring of water gushing up to eternal life... water that quenches all thirsts... and there are some important differences between these two stories...

Nicodemus is a man... the woman is not... Nicodemus is named... the woman is not... Nicodemus is an elder and a teacher... the woman is not... Nicodemus is a Jew... the woman is... I don't want to say... well... but she may be or she may not be...

You see... Samaritans were descendants of two distinct groups... the remnant of the ten tribes associated with the Northern Kingdom of Israel... Jews who were not deported when the Northern Kingdom fell in 722 BCE... and foreign colonists from Babylonia and Media... brought in by the Assyrian conquerors of Samaria... and so according to Jewish purity laws... this woman is impure... she is rejected... because she has been assimilated... and it's scandalous that Jesus would even think of drinking from a Samaritan vessel... and even further... part of the tension between the Samaritans and the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile... was created by the Samaritans' opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple... they worshipped on Mt. Gerizim... that's why she asks Jesus about the proper place to worship... it might be like someone asking whether it's right to use the BCP or the ELW...

But Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night... under the cover of darkness... the woman is there at noon... in the light of day... and there are patriarchal whispers that this woman comes at noon because of her shame... she comes in the heat of the day when other women would not... so she can avoid them... there are patriarchal whispers that she is a loose woman... that's why she's been married five times...

Gail O'Day... a Professor of Biblical Preaching at the Chandler School of Theology... writes in the Women's Bible Commentary... *the text does not say that the woman has been divorced five times... only that she has had five husbands... and we should be leery of what so many patriarchal interpretations say about her moral laxity... perhaps... like Tamar in Genesis 38... she has been trapped in the custom of Levirate marriage... and the last male in the family line has refused to marry her... she may simply be the victim of an unenlightened social order...*

The woman is identified as a Samaritan three times... emphasizing how remarkable this conversation is... but Jesus breaks open boundaries... and his conversation with her serves two purposes... it illustrates his knowledge of all things... and it's a moment of revelation for the woman who can now see Jesus with new eyes... as a prophet... she is the first character in the Gospel to engage in a serious theological conversation with Jesus... so she asks the most pressing theological question that stands between Jews and Samaritans... about the proper place to worship God... and in response to Jesus' answer... she begins to think about the possibility of him being the Messiah...

The woman comes to the well... she recalls that her ancestor Jacob gave it to her people... she recalls the story that's told in Genesis 29... Jacob comes into a field with a well in the middle of it... the well is covered by a huge stone... there are three shepherds with their three flocks... and while Jacob is talking to them about his kinsman Laban... Laban's daughter Rachel comes with her sheep... Jacob suggests that they roll back the stone so Rachel's sheep can drink... but they refused... saying in v. 8...

We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well...

But Jacob... who will soon wrestle with the angel... and be renamed Israel... *one who has striven with God*... Jacob is an outsider... he too is breaking the local norms... breaking social expectations... breaking them for a woman... he moves the stone so that Rachel's sheep can water...

Nicodemus... a man... a Jew... and elder and teacher... comes to Jesus at night... and seems not to understand what Jesus is talking about... *Are you a teacher of Israel... and yet you do not understand these things?*

But unlike Nicodemus... this woman proves to be a worthy conversation partner for Jesus... who increasingly discerns who Jesus is... Nicodemus is part of the establishment... the prevailing system... the domination system... the woman is not...

You see... Nicodemus has too much to lose by seeing... by really seeing... who is right in front of him... by understanding what Jesus says... what Jesus offers... the woman on the other hand... has nothing to lose... and that's how it almost always is... those who buy into the prevailing systems... who are a part of the systems which engulf us... have too much to lose by fully embracing what Jesus offers... and often... unfortunately... those people are men...

On February 8... we celebrated a Rite 13 rite of passage... we celebrated a young girl who's moving into womanhood... March 8... was International Women's Day... a day that celebrates the efforts which advocate for women's rights and dignity around the world... do we really mean those things... do we in this country really see women as equal partners... is there equal pay for equal work... are there still glass ceilings... and if not... why not... men want women to be the mothers of their children... of those who will inherit their estates... but do we advocate often enough... and loudly enough... and

effectively enough... against domestic abuse... against human trafficking... against prostitution and the forces which keep women in those lives... against the honor killings which still happen around the world... or are we still willing to look away when our interests are threatened... how are we willing to help those... who like Nicodemus... are blinded by position... and power... and authority... so they can see who stands in front of them... and the living water that is offered as gift...

At the end of January... I met with Bp. Craig Satterlee's assistant Sarah... Sarah was about to deliver her second child... and I asked how she was doing... she laughed... and said that she was losing weight... but that the baby was gaining weight... the next day... I was thinking about what she said... I thought... *her body and blood is giving that baby new life*... and I wondered whether Jesus thought about how his mother Mary's body and blood gave him new life... and I remembered that in Eucharist... Jesus says his body and blood give new life... how in every moment... God is continually emptying God's self into us... forgiving us... loving us... giving us new life...

Today's Gospel story about the woman coming to the well... is a story about opening the well of eternal life now... the gushing water of eternal and spiritual life is available now... we don't have to wait until all the flocks are gathered together... that's why Jesus emphasizes... *the hour is coming... and is here now... when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth... for the Father seeks such as these to worship him*... it's not about the place... Jesus says... it's about the relationship... and the Greek word that's used for worship... means prostrating oneself in the direction of the One worshipped... *metanoia*... repenting... turning back towards God...

Today's Gospel translation has Jesus saying... *I am he... the one who is speaking to you*... but in the Greek... he simply says... *I am*... the same *I am that I am*... that for Moses... God named Godself... the same *I am* in John 8:58... when Jesus said... *before Abraham was... I am*... the same *I am* with which Jesus identified himself in the garden... when 600 Roman soldiers fell to the ground...

Verses 1 - 7 of today's Psalm... form the *Venite* in Morning Prayer... in both Lutheran and Episcopal prayer books... and monks and nuns start each day chanting this prayer... *open our lips to praise... God made us... and not the other way around... so let us listen... and not harden our hearts as at Meribah... and Massah... in Exodus... the people quarreled and tested God and asked... Is the Lord among us or not? The Samaritan woman did not test Jesus...*

Bp. Satterlee wrote about this text... *Jesus makes known a God who is not enshrined in Jerusalem or on Mt. Gerizim... or behind our stained glass windows... or in our familiar family pews... God is not bound to any particular building... appointment... style... or worship book... we worship God in Spirit and in Truth... and the Truth is... that the Spirit is active... causing us to reorient our lives... so that everything we do... is worship...*

Jacob moved the stone... so that life giving water was available... and the woman at the well can't have been too unreliable... too discredited... because her testimony... her story... brought others to believe... and we all have our own stories... our own Jacobs... who move away various kinds of stones... which keep us from accessing the life-giving Way... that God has laid out for us...

Today's Gospel is God's story... but it's also our story...

Mike+