

Sermon Lent III Year A 2011
Exodus 17:1-7
Romans: 5:1-11
John 4:5-42
Psalm 95
Bill Watson
March 27, 2011

A few years back during our summer of study and mission work in Africa, I developed a new appreciation for access to clean water. But even then I did not have to worry about gathering water. Water flows through pipes to convenient access points. Then one day in Malawi, we were travelling to visit Lake Malawi and experienced car trouble. People came quickly to our aid. One man rode his bike to town to pick up some tools to make a preliminary repair so that we could drive to a nearby garage. As we waited in the shade of a tree, I noticed a teen-aged girl who walked a path through a field and across the road and out of sight. She carried a large plastic water container on her head and I watched as she walked back and forth. She was carrying the large water jug to a central well, filling it and then walking home. The trip took about 30 minutes. During the time that we waited I saw her go back and forth at least four times. I was amazed at the effort that something as simple as getting water required.

The damage from the earthquake caused tsunami in Japan has brought concerns for safe drinking water in Japan and elsewhere in sharp relief. As we know, water is vital to survival.

Water is a particularly timely subject and water is the common element in our lessons from Exodus and John this morning. We are so fortunate to be able to access clean safe water at the turn of the faucet. But the centrality of water to life is underscored in our lessons this morning.

The story of the woman at the well seems so familiar that it may have lost some of its drama. Yet, it is a remarkable story underscored by the fact that this is the longest conversation with Jesus. So let's go back in our minds eye to noon on that day so long ago. Jesus was tired, exhausted and thirsty from his morning's journey and stopped at a well in the Samaritan city of Sychar. The disciples have gone into town to obtain food.

“A Samaritan woman came to draw water.” Scholars say that with that short introduction we can draw some significant insights. The well at this crossroads was the central gathering point in the community for people and for livestock. Usually shepherds would bring their herds to be watered twice a day, in early morning and early evening. Likewise the role of getting water each morning was a task for women who ventured to the well after the shepherds had departed. The well provided a place of community for those who came in the cool of the morning to draw water. There they could talk and catch up on the village news, etc.

But this particular woman came at the most unlikely time, at noon, in the heat of the day when no one else was likely to be there. Scholars believe that this tells us that she was coming at this inopportune time to avoid contact with others. Her difficult life story has probably been the subject of gossip at this well for some time. She has come during the heat of the day when she will not be the brunt of other’s discussion and gossip.

So in the midday heat the stage is set for a very unlikely encounter between a Samaritan woman and a Hebrew man. Unlikely for several reasons, first, for centuries there had been enmity between the Jewish people and the Samaritans who had refused to participate in the restoration of Jerusalem after the return from Exile. Jewish law prohibited contact between Jews and Samaritans.

But Jesus broke a second rule; he spoke to a woman in public. And a third rule, they also didn’t share drinking utensils. Jesus is engaging in this conversation and is breaking all the rules. That is why the woman responded, “How is it that you a Jew ask a drink of a woman of Samaria?”

She cannot believe that he is speaking to her. Jesus offers her living water which she interprets on a literal level. But the possibility of not having to make this unpleasant trip to the well each day encourages her questioning. Jesus is offering the gift of faith, of the sustaining Spirit that has the power to satisfy our deepest needs. Who could turn down the possibility of such a gift? Then Jesus reveals just how well he knows this woman. Her complex story is known not only by all the other villagers but by Jesus as well.

Jesus knows her story intimately and this may make us pause realizing that God knows our stories too, in just as much detail. The Collect for Purity that we say at the beginning of the Eucharist, “Almighty God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid” certainly defines our understanding.

With her history revealed, she senses that Jesus must have a divine connection. In response, Jesus reveals his identity as the Messiah for the first time in John’s gospel to this woman. Jesus reveals the truth of his divinity to the most unlikely of persons. It is a profound encounter indeed.

Through this experience Jesus stretched the disciples to enter into relationship with a people they couldn’t even imagine speaking with. Today Jesus calls us to extend ourselves as well.

Jesus models for us then in this Lenten season a new possible response to repentance and renewal. Perhaps we are to consider who the people are that we would not dare speak with or converse with or share a drink of water with. Who is God calling us into relationship with?

Or another possibility, who is God calling us back into relationship with? Who have we been cut off from relationship with? Perhaps that cut-off has gone on for a long time, maybe we don’t have any desire to reengage. Yet, it is possible that that is the person that God hopes we might become reconciled with.

A friend of mine shared her story of forgiveness and renewal that occurred when she was in seminary. Over the course of her seminary studies she came to understand that she needed to work for reconciliation with her father from whom she had been estranged for some time. But she knew this would not be easy. As the saying goes there had been a lot of water under the dam and they had not spoken in many years. As the time drew near for her ordination as a deacon she knew this might offer an occasion for reconciliation. She really hoped that her father might attend.

She wanted to invite him to her ordination service but was afraid that the experience would make him uncomfortable since he was not an Episcopalian. She developed a plan. She sent him an invitation and along with the invitation a BCP. She wrote a letter

explaining the ordination service and marked the pages in the prayer book. She wanted to do everything that she could to make him feel comfortable if he attended. The day of her ordination finally arrived. And there to her great joy and surprise was her father. They became reconciled that day and have been able to maintain their relationship ever since.

Today's dramatic encounter reveals something I think of God's hope for us. As members of the church, the body of Christ, God is always calling us into relationship. We have come this morning in spite of the weather because God has called us here. And not only us, God is calling others as well. Because Christ's body, the church, is open to all. God wants everyone to know that God's love extends not only to this particular woman at the well as incredibly unlikely as that might seem. But God's love knows no bounds. God's love extends to all. With that love comes God's hopes for our relationship, our healing, our sharing with one another, our acceptance of one another no matter our background.

The good news of Jesus' offer of the water of life is extended to the woman at the well. Who is God calling us to extend this gift of living water to, of new life, of new relationship? God is always bringing us into contact with those who we might have trouble with or difficulty with (sometimes for good reason). But God's great hope is for healing and restoration. And no one is beyond the reach of that hoped for restoration. That is the good news of the gospel.

Theologian Linda Bridges writes of the woman at the well, "Evangelism is allowing one's life to be the conduit of God's grace for another. Our name or family pedigree does not matter. Our past history is of no concern. All that God requires is willing vessels who will leave behind the past and walk boldly into the future, carrying the living water of God's forgiveness and mercy in their lives. A nameless woman from Samaria walks before us not simply as a paradigm for immorality, but as a paradigm for evangelism. (Synthesis, p. 2, Lent III, 2008)

The woman at the well became the first evangelist. She was the first to share her story of how her encounter with the mercy and love of Jesus transformed her. "Many Samaritans from that city believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony."

Our world is different in so many ways from that hot dusty day in Samaria so long ago. But some things don't change; our world is also filled with people who believe that the brokenness of their lives leaves them outside the realm of God's love and concern. God is counting on us to share the good news that God's love and forgiveness extends to everyone, absolutely everyone. You see, God is counting on us. You and I are part of God's plan of salvation, that all might come within the reach of Jesus' saving embrace.