

“A MAN, A WOMAN, AND A WELL”

Rev. Victor Kim

John 4:5-42

(03-15-20) Lent 3

Social distancing.

That's a term I wasn't familiar with until late this week. Of course, it refers to keeping a particular distance from others in this period of viral transmission. All of us are encouraged to follow the advice from our medical experts in trying to flatten the curve of transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

I was on a conference call with other faith leaders this week with Premier John Horgan, Minister of Health Adrian Dix and Dr. Bonnie Henry, the Provincial Medical Health Officer. During that call it was impressed on us as faith leaders to help our communities do what we can to lessen the transmission of the virus, especially to those who are the most vulnerable, in particular our seniors, by restricting gatherings and activities that would be high risk for viral transmission. While stopping all worship gatherings was not suggested, we know that the situation is fluid and some places of worship have suspended their gatherings for the time being. Our Session is meeting after worship today to discuss what our next steps will be and the congregation will continue to be informed about our response.

In a way it's a bit ironic that in this day of keeping social distance between people that the text for this 3rd Sunday of Lent is all about **Jesus closing the distance between people**, between himself and the Samaritan woman at the well. Generally, when scripture introduces a story that revolves around a man, a woman and a well, it's about marriage.

Remember the story of Jacob and Rachel, who meet for the first time around a well, perhaps it's that same well that Jesus and the Samaritan woman meet around in our text. And earlier in the same family history, Abraham sends his most trusted servant back to his homeland to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant first meets Rebekah, who will come to marry Isaac, around a well. Or how about the story of Moses who as he was fleeing Egypt encounters the daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian, at a well, and ends up marrying Zipporah, one of the daughters? Well, this isn't a story of Jesus meeting his wife to be, but it is a story rooted in his love for people, and in this case, his love for this Samaritan woman at the well. **The motivation that encourages us to keep a social distance from one another at this time and the one that also seems to lead Jesus to travel through Samaria and strike up this highly unlikely conversation with a Samaritan woman, is the same motivation, the care for the other, love for those who are the most vulnerable around us.**

The text says that Jesus had to go through Samaria. If Jesus had to go through Samaria, it wasn't because there weren't any other roads available to him. In fact there were three common roads from Jerusalem to Galilee and two of them would have skirted around Samaria. Though the road through Samaria was the most direct route, the other roads were there so that those Jews who wished to avoid traveling through Samaria could do so. Jews and Samaritans did not mesh well in the time of Jesus. When the gospel writer says that Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans, he is being charitable in his description. While we often associate the word Samaritan with Good, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, those two words would not have ever been expected to be said together if you were a Jew in the time of Jesus.

Jews and Samaritans shared a common heritage and history, they were once the same people, but over time differences around marriage and religious practice, in particular around where the true worship of God was to take place, created a distance between the two peoples that fostered an increasing animosity, fear and hatred. Jesus would have been well versed in all of that, yet he chooses to go through Samaria. For Jesus to do that there had to be a better reason than mere geography or convenience.

As Jesus so often does, he goes where he goes for a reason.

As we hear the full story of the text we know that the result of his encounter and conversation with the Samaritan woman was the belief of many Samaritans in Jesus.

And as Jesus says, there's a time coming when what matters won't be whether you worship God on this mountain or in Jerusalem, but that you'll worship God in spirit and in truth. Jesus chooses to go through Samaria to close that distance, that space of fear and hatred, to bring new healing to an old division and wound. And in his embrace of the Samaritans, even staying with them in that place for two days, and imagine how the disciples spent that time, perhaps practicing some social distancing, **Jesus also closes the distance between those who think that they alone have the right understanding and access to God and those whom God loves, all those whom God created in God's image.**

But I think the person for whom the actions of Jesus mean the most is the woman at the well. **She doesn't have a name that we are told, but she's famous and her strength and courage and finally her faith has stayed with us throughout the years.** Jesus meets her for the first time in the heat of the midday sun, a Samaritan woman who comes to the well to draw water. Jesus asks her for a drink and thus begins the longest recorded conversation Jesus has with anyone in the Bible.

It might strike us as somewhat surprising that Jesus' partner for this record length conversation was the Samaritan woman at the well. Why? Because the woman has often been portrayed as a scandalous figure, someone not seemingly worthy of so much of Jesus' attention or time. As the conversation progresses, Jesus asks her to go and get her husband and come back. The woman says to Jesus, I have no husband. Jesus knows, she has had 5 husbands and the man she is with now is not her husband.

And its here, in this section of the text that tells us that the woman had been married 5 times and is currently living with someone who is not her husband that the portrayal of the Samaritan woman as woman of loose moral values and character finds its origin. She is scandalous, married 5 times and seemingly working on a 6th. Jewish law permitted that a person could be divorced up to 3 times, but beyond that, well it seemed that there was only one reason why a person would exceed that maximum. If Samaritans observed at least this law in common with the Jews, then the woman at the well would have been condemned and ostracized by her community. **So why would Jesus give so much time and attention to someone like this woman?**

But it's curious that when Jesus says to the woman that she has had 5 husbands and the man she is with now is not her husband, **there is no command or invitation to repent, no talk of sin, no sense that Jesus is trying to get the woman to understand the error of her ways.** He merely affirms that what the woman said, that she does not have a husband, is true. **Could it be that we have misunderstood?** Could it be that we have judged the Samaritan woman as being something she is not because we have a set of normative values by which we make judgments? Married 5 times, and currently with another man who is not her husband.

Countless sermons have been preached on the sinful character of the woman, someone who is in need of saving. **But if she is in need of saving, it seems that it is for other reasons entirely.**

Is it possible that Jesus doesn't say anything about her 5 marriages and her current living situation **because he doesn't make the same assumptions that we do?** In his lack of condemnation, does Jesus understand something about this woman that most do not? Was she widowed by her earlier husbands? Was she abandoned or divorced by her previous husbands? Since women did not have the power to divorce their husbands, it would have had to have been the husband's decision to divorce her. She might have been powerless to resist what was done to her. Or she could have been in what is known as a Levirate marriage, where she is married to a succession of brothers of her deceased husband so that by having children with a brother, her deceased husband's lineage could be maintained. **In the words of one commentator, there are any number of ways, in fact, that one might imagine this woman's story as tragic rather than scandalous, yet most assume the latter.**¹

Why is that?

I think that it's because we have this sense of what should be normative and we find it difficult when something challenges our assumptions and our conventions. **Do we need to close the distance between our assumptions and God's intentions,** especially around issues of gender, both in the church and outside of it? The Samaritan woman lived in a time when power lay only in the hands of men. Women belonged to the men they were with, whether it was their fathers, their husbands or the man she happened to be living with.

¹ David Lose, *Misogyny, Moralism and the Woman at the Well*. March 21, 2011

And the woman at the well could have been easily living with a relative, a man who took her in and cared for her when no one else would touch her given her past.

Women and children were not considered equal to men and widows and orphans were the most vulnerable in any society because they lacked the protection and provision of an adult male in their lives. And this inequality was fostered within the religious community, primarily as an act of power. It was very much the case in the time of Jesus. **But Jesus, who lived roughly 2000 years before the Presbyterian Church in Canada came around on the equality of women and men in ministry, embraced women in his ministry, welcomed women into his circle of friends and disciples. Not only did he welcome women, he went out of his way to do so.** He had to go through Samaria, not because he was in a hurry, **but because he wanted to make a point.** He wanted to show by his inclusive welcome of Samaritans and this particular woman, that **all people** were invited to drink of the water he offered, the living water of eternal life.

The ministry of Jesus is about newness in imagining inclusion and identity. His ministry reimagined what normal was around the role of women and the equality of women before God, in whose image all people, male and female, are created. Later in scripture, Paul, who at times seemed conflicted on the role and place of women in the church, was inspired to write that there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; **for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.** And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. **All belong to Christ, all are Abraham's offspring, and all are heirs of the promise.**

Jesus went through Samaria because he wanted to teach us something about identity. Jesus doesn't tell the woman at the well that she needs saving because of her **past history**. Rather, Jesus is interested in offering her **a new identity**, as a follower of the messiah, **as one who has quenched her thirst with the living water of eternal life**.

If we can imagine a new identity as followers of the messiah, as those who are replenished by the living waters of eternal life, then perhaps we can begin to reimagine other things as well. Our theme for Lent this year is, **"When they see us, do they see Jesus?" I would say this, if we don't first see Jesus in others, then nothing we do, nothing we say, nothing in the way we live, will cause others to see Jesus in us.**

If we keep increasing the distance between ourselves and others instead of closing that distance, then why would we expect others see Jesus in us?

Lent is a time of repentance.

It's a time to repent from the way we categorize others, especially those who aren't like us, those who we have already prejudged. **Jesus goes out of his way to encounter difference** and to close that distance rooted in fear, prejudice, historical animosity. **How much do we go out of our way to encounter difference?** Isn't it usually the opposite, that we go out of our way **to avoid difference**, to **keep** the distance between ourselves and those we find undesirable, unworthy? **How will others see Jesus in us if we refuse to see him in them?**

I wonder who it is that we might need to look at differently? Who are those people in whom we have never imagined that we would see Jesus? Why do we think that? If Jesus is willing to cut through the barriers of tradition, religious conviction, gender roles and expectations, if Jesus is willing to close the distance between those who have been kept at a distance for too long, why wouldn't we follow his lead?

Imagine seeing Jesus in that person who we just can't stand or who we fear.

What would that do to us? The virus in our midst has shut down so much in our society, but it must not shut down love, our love for all those in whom we must see Jesus.

A man, a woman and a well.

The story doesn't end in marriage, **but it's all about love.** It's about the love Jesus has for all God's children, Jews or Samaritans, or even us. It's about the love that closes the distance that human sin and brokenness creates. It's about a love that leads the Samaritan woman to become the first evangelist for Jesus in John's gospel as she tells everyone in her town about the man who told her everything she'd ever done, a man who she thought might even be the Messiah! The story is about the newness that comes from love, the love of Jesus for the Samaritan woman and for all people.

And it's a story that offers us the hope of newness for ourselves as we see Jesus in all people, so that when they see us, they too would see Jesus in us.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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