



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Woman at the Well

Sermon for Lent 3, March 19, 2017

Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42; Psalm 95

Sermon text: A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink."

Tomorrow is the first day of spring. The signs are somewhat difficult to see, buried beneath two feet of snow.

But you can count of the seasons: the sun is making its tilted annual journey around the sun and we are due to come back into the greater light. We can count on the earth spinning once a day: and so the sun came up this morning and will do so again tomorrow. I'm pretty sure of that.

But you never know. If the sun blows up right now, we will die in 8 minutes when the blast hits the earth. I better get to my point or you may not hear the end of the sermon.

Life is short. The 19 year old grandson of a good friend of ours was killed in a car accident last week. Traffic fatalities are on the rise, after decades of decline, due to texting and other distractions associated with cell phone use. On the other hand, the heroin epidemic does not seem to be affecting teenagers as much as their slightly older peers; something about their addition to smart phones has helped.

We are inundated with news. We know about so many problems in the world. But we may not know that the neighbor down the street is broken-hearted because of a cancer diagnosis. we may not know that her child just got accepted into college. We see the outside assurance of someone well dressed and well spoken. We may not know that they received notice that their job is being phased out. My friends, look around. Do you know these people? Some of them. Do you know that some of them write poetry, others feel a sort of mystic union with the cosmos when they walk in the woods, some know more about the civil war than most history teachers, some have traveled to war zones to help refugees, some are planning to get married, others, well, you get the picture.

How wonderful it is to hear another human being's story! How deep and rich and strange are our lives. I think that is what Jesus was thinking about half way through his conversation with the woman at the well. Like many an encounter, it begins with a simple question or request. Can I have a drink of water from your bucket?

Hold on. Picture the scene. A stone ring around an ancient well; a woman is there with her bucket on a rope. It's hot. The man is alone; his friends have gone off to buy food for dinner. The village is in Samaria, what used to be known as Israel, the northern kingdom before the Assyrians conquered in 700 years earlier and took away the 10 tribes. Some stayed, though, and others came. They kept their faith in the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, their ancestor (also known as Israel). It was Jacob who dug the well, over a thousand years earlier. But they didn't believe what the Jews in the southern kingdom of Judah always claimed, that God had commanded King David to build the capital at Jerusalem, and Solomon his son to build the Temple, that all Jews needed to come and worship there. No. Their forefathers, including Jacob, had worshipped on the holy mountain here. That was good enough for them.

So there was a division and enmity between Jews and Samaritans. And here was a Jewish man asking a Samaritan woman for a drink of water.

"You talking to me? You're a Jew aren't you? Not supposed to talk to me, a Samaritan and a woman beside. You must be really thirsty."

"You see a man, a Jew. But if you really knew who you were talking to, if you could see the stranger talking to you as a gift from God, if you knew that he has living water, you might ask him for a drink too."

"I see no bucket, no water. You sound like a crazy person. Get away from me, Jew. Help!"

But that is not what the woman at the well did. Instead the conversation continued. She asked questions. She wondered what he meant. She was intrigued by this idea of living water, water that if you drank it you would never thirst again, for it would create in you a spring of life you could always draw from. The well of Spirit that needs only the bucket of faith to drink of.

Would that more of our conversation might become springs of living water! It is possible to get better at the art of conversation. Practice. Ask gently probing questions. Respond to someone's brief mention of a loss or a diagnosis or a blessing not with stories of our own (how quick we are to move from listening to waiting to speak!) but with curious invitation. There is a mystery here, in the person before you. Tell me, where do you get your hope, how do you sustain your faith? From what well do you draw living water?

The woman at the well asked for more. Jesus said, bring your husband. I am not married, she replied. I know, said Jesus, keen judge of character. How interesting that he knew so much about this woman—a godlike power perhaps. But we can often tell a great deal if we look closely and listen carefully. You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to detect sorrow or surprise in the face of another. Jesus wanted to spread the good news. At first he thought he might be sent only to the Jews. But here was one of those stories in which a new insight comes to him. I am also called to proclaim the good news of the coming kingdom to the Samaritans. He spent a couple of days with them, unplanned. What the woman told them—a man with prophetic powers, possibly the Messiah—they began to judge through their own experience. And Jesus learned something too, the widening gyre of God's grace.

So we take the stories we hear—some from the Bible , others from tradition—about God and hold them against our own experience and the stories of the people we know. I have been blessed in my life to meet people whose faith in God opened my eyes, who gave me a drink of living water. When they gave their stories to me, when they prayed with me and for me, I think it was Jesus speaking through their words, Jesus in their faces when they looked at mine. We cannot, I think, live by ancient texts alone. We need living words, living water. We are fed and watered by each other.

And you don't know beforehand where spiritual nourishment may be found, what stranger may have it in store. Last week a number of us visited the Masjid al-Noor, the mosque of the Mid-Hudson Islamic Center in Wappingers Falls. Very pleasant visit, interesting to see their children being taught how to pray after a sort of class, to meet folks from the congregation as well as the president and imam of the mosque. But what was best was simply being there. Paying a visit. Saying, we see you and are not scared but curious. Tell us about your faith. Later, perhaps, we can tell you about ours. But for now let us tell you that we value your presence in our community, your contribution, your children, your stories, your lives. We are richer for your presence. Thank you. For it was clear that many others did not see them this way. They saw the strangers as threats and possibly enemies, as bringing not a different way to worship our one God but a wrong and dangerous change.

Here at Grace we actively embrace the stranger. We seek to serve those who are immigrants and refugees. As we read in the Bible, Moses taught the people to always welcome the stranger, the sojourner, the alien in their midst, for they were once strangers and sojourners and aliens in Egypt. We all come from somewhere else and here together now, if only from the past to this present moment. We all come from lives of struggle and triumph, sorrow and joy. We all love our children and hope for the best. Hear the stories, make the connection. We have opportunities to tutor through ESL classes; Evelyn is hosting a lunch for tutors this week. Abby is offering a new opportunity to learn Spanish, in conversation with young adults of the immigrant community who attend our EPIC youth leadership program. Further information is in the leaflet

Life is short. So don't wait for some ideal encounter. Or rather consider every encounter an opportunity not to be missed—as if it might be Jesus who meets you for lunch at the diner, the Samaritan woman who is bagging your groceries. Not every encounter will involve more than pleasantries—but some may lead to much more. In the letter to the Hebrews we read, in reference to Abraham and Sarah welcoming three travelers who turned out to be angels of God: “Do not neglect to show hospitality, for in welcoming strangers you may be entertaining angels unaware.”

In Christ's name, Amen.

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