

SERMON – “JESUS AND THE WOMAN AT THE WELL”
RADICAL HOSPITALITY, MARCH 2, 2008
JOHN 4: 5-31

This morning’s gospel has always been one of my favorite stories – so much so, that I didn’t want to skip over it – it was actually scheduled for last week’s lectionary reading but we used readings more directly appropriate for our emphasis on World Hunger.

We have been talking a lot about “Radical Hospitality” in the planning retreat and the church council. In this scene at the well of Jacob, Jesus models this concept for us. Let’s take another look at this story.

Let me say that Radical Hospitality goes far beyond finding ways of drawing in new members into our church. The concept is how do we extend ourselves in such a way to open a dialogue with others that breaks down barriers, and fears, and stereotypes, and open ourselves to a humanity that sees human need without first going to a place of judgment.

One has to know the history and the cultural norms to understand how Jesus broke through multiple barriers to reach this woman with the love of God.

As the story goes, he was at the well alone – the disciples had gone into the village to look for food. Here was Jesus at a well with no way to draw water – perhaps this encounter truly began out of his own thirst. As he looked down the road, here was a woman coming to complete her daily task of drawing and carrying water back to her home. Perhaps his first thought was – here is my “savior” – it’s noon and I’m parched and stupidly, I have no way to draw water from this well. Thank God for this woman!

A simple interaction? Not at all! What got in the way were century old barriers. Her first response named it all!

How can you a Jew ask a drink of me, a Samaritan?

How can you a man ask a drink of me, a woman?

It's just not done! Jews and Samaritans couldn't avoid each other in a small strip of land but they did not speak to each other. It went back to at least the 6th century before the Christian Era. It went back to Israel being conquered by the Assyrians and sent into exile in Babylon. The Assyrians then imported the Samaritans from several regions to occupy and work the land. The Samaritans and the Jews both worshiped the same God, YHWH, but the Samaritans didn't acknowledge any writings beyond the Torah and the Jews thought the Samaritans faith was tainted by their intermarriage with pagans. The Samaritans believed in a Messiah that would duplicate the liberating acts of Moses, while the Jews sought a Messiah that would perpetuate the victories of David. The differences grew as they usually do when ethnic or religious barriers are erected.

I can't help but go to modern day Israel and Palestine and draw the parallels – Jews, Muslims, and Christians all with at least 10 centuries of history on one small piece of land in the world – all worshiping the same God – yet the distinctions is what has defined them and what has destroyed them. I cried as I heard of over 90 Palestinians killed in Gaza this week as Israeli troops attacked. I am so moved when I hear of those who have attempted to cross the barriers and to seek the ways to peace. A number of years ago, I attended a week long workshop at Eastern Mennonite University which brought together persons who had experienced traumatic events in their lives. It was a global group of about 20 persons. I was there as a New Yorker post 9/11. There was a woman who was an Israeli Jew who was working with Palestinians trying to find those bridges to peace. There was an Iraqi Muslim doctor who had come from Baghdad. There was a woman from Sierra Leone

and a man from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, both of whom had experienced tribal conflicts.

How does one break through the barriers? It has to do with radical hospitality – with the desire to really know another human being – especially those who take us out of our comfort zones because they seem “different” or whom we have been programmed to be suspicious or judgmental of. It is about seeing ourselves on an equal plain as humans with both flaws and gifts and believe that we have something to learn and receive from “the other”.

So back to the story! Jews and Samaritans do not share things in common with each other – she would have to share her cup with this strange Jewish man. Also, she was fearful – it was an insult for this man to even speak to her as a woman alone. She may have already been profoundly isolated from her community and that is why she drew water at midday rather than at the normal early morning time with other women. If this encounter was witnessed, it could be a disaster. Or worse than that, what were the real intentions of this man?

It’s like the man who approached a woman at the supermarket and asked if she knew where he would find peanut butter. Her response was to ask if he was hitting on her! A frivolous example – but goes to perhaps the deep seated fear of a stranger’s motivation and the immediate. Most of us women can identify with that fear of being approached by a strange man in an isolated place – all our antennae go up! Violence to women has erected its own set of walls.

But Jesus continues to work at crossing the barriers and shifts the conversation to the offer of “living water”. He can’t quench her physical thirst – that’s in her hands and he is in her hands to quench his. But what he does have to offer is that which can break down the hurtful boundaries - the pain of isolation of feeling different, the fear of the “other” – the reconciling power of living

water that can flow within us and around us to step beyond the stereotypes of persons who are different from us – the barriers of all those “isms” - racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, etc. By engaging her in this conversation, he’s crossing the boundaries that have been artificially been erected by society. She has been drawn into another level of relationship – she now wants to know what he’s talking about. Is he crazy or does he really have something to offer that she has never experienced?

We have questions to ask ourselves about our willingness to really explore the avenues of radical hospitality. Are we as the church, willing and ready, to step out and cross any of these erected barriers? Where do we need to do our work here in Stony Brook? Who may feel excluded from our fellowship because we haven’t done the work of examining our own attitudes or we haven’t explicitly extended the welcome to those who may feel uncomfortable? This week at the Lenten café we will be exploring the question of faith and sexuality: there is more that we can do to affirm that we are an open and welcoming church to gay and lesbian persons. Last week, we served at the homeless shelter – how can we extend the welcome to persons who are homeless. Just a couple of examples.

Let me tell you the story of Anne LaMott. In her mid-twenties, Anne was an alcohol and Cocaine addict. Her Sunday morning routine was to hang out at a flea market in a part in San Francisco. Next to the park was a dilapidated church which had its doors open and she began to be attracted to in as she heard them singing. It became her practice to stand on the steps and listen, never entering. Members would greet her and offer the invitation, but not try to force her in. Eventually, she began to stand at the back, and gradually moved into a pew – leaving before the sermon. After months she began to stay for the whole service and in her own time joined the church, formed a Sunday School after the birth of her son, Sam, and today is a prolific writer of spiritual essays and short

novels. Her writings have drawn others to the Christian faith. What if she had only faced a congregation that saw her as addict and didn't welcome her gracefully? What would the world have lost if her life's path had not encountered that church that loved her to wholeness and holiness?

Jesus' act with this simple woman at the well, broke open the community in incredible ways. She went from a woman seeing herself as Samaritan meeting Jew in fear (and distaste), a woman approached by a strange man to two humans in dialogue, an isolated woman who went back to her community and shared the story in such a way that they also went out to find this man, and became a reconciler – perhaps the beginning story that broke open the early followers of the movement to open their arms to strangers.

As we come to Christ's table with an open invitation, I challenge you to reflect on where we can improve on our radical hospitality to those who currently stand outside our doors. Jesus has offered us the living water in order that we can offer it to others. One by one, may we graciously draw our neighbor into the embracing love of God through Christ.