A.M.D.G. Lent 3 - A Text: John 4: 5 - 42

March 19th, 2017

**John 4: 5-42** So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

 Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’ The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am he,the one who is speaking to you.’

 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ They left the city and were on their way to him.

 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’ But he said to them, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about.’ So the disciples said to one another, ‘Surely no one has brought him something to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, “Four months more, then comes the harvest”? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, “One sows and another reaps.” I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.’

 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word.They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.’

 ***“Leaving Our Waterjars Behind”***

The former minister from our neighbouring congregation of University Hill United, the Rev. Ed Searcy, tells the story of visiting the World of Coke display in Atlanta, Georgia, one day. At the conclusion of a journey through the history of Coca-Cola – which – as an aside - was created by a pharmacist trying to create a tonic that would help Civil War veterans cope with chronic physical pain - Ed says he watched a wide-screen video that showed people in every culture drinking the so-called life-giving elixir. Singers in the background to the video chanted, “*life .... life .... life”* - then the doors opened and everyone was ushered into a room where there was a huge fountain. And when you placed your cup on the edge - water shot up from the centre of the fountain - landing on a sensor above the glass that then filled with ... you got it! Coke! People were encouraged to drink as much as they wanted.

Is there something about that scene that sounds a little - well, *evangelical*? A little familiar? It certainly draws heavily on the story from John’s gospel about Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well. Scholars tell us that Jesus talks longer to her than he does to anyone else in all the Gospels - longer than he talks to any of his disciples, longer than he talks to any of his accusers, longer than he talks to any of his own family. She is the first person he reveals himself to in the Gospel of John. She is the first outsider to guess who he is and tell others. And she is the first evangelist, John tells us, with her testimony bringing many to faith.

Jesus choice of her is a curious one - because when I say outsider, I mean ***outsider***. The woman at the well was a triple outsider. In the first place, she was a Samaritan, which made her a half-breed and full pagan as far as the Jewish purists were concerned. She was also, of course, a woman. And in Jesus’ time - women were not what you might call liberated. There were not even allowed to worship with men - whose morning devotions always included the prayer, “*Thank God that I am not a woman.”*

Women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially by holy men, who did not speak to their own ***wives*** in public. One group of pious men was known as the “bruised and bleeding Pharisees” because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses!

And the Samaritan woman was also somewhat of a social outcast. Many have deduced from the way the story develops that she was a fallen woman – or a local prostitute. Certainly, tradition has always portrayed her like that. But as Fred Craddock, well-known preacher and biblical scholar says - that might be a distorted understanding. To be sure - Jesus knows she has been married five times and now is with a man who is not her husband. But what are the particulars, Craddock asks. Deaths? Divorces? Legal tangles? Or is it promiscuity? We simply do not know the circumstances.

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But whatever the circumstances that this Samaritan woman faced - the story indicates that she was a social misfit. Respectable women made their trips to the well in the cool of the day - at early morning or dusk, when they could greet one another and talk about the news.

But from the fact that she showed up at high noon - this woman was quite probably someone they talked ***about*** - and was not welcome at their morning social hour. Coming to the well alone, after the others had gone, probably made it less painful all around.

So imagine her surprise when she comes in the heat of the day with her water bucket balanced on her head - and sees a strange man sitting beside the well. She can tell at a glance that he is a Jew .... but what in the world is he doing there? Has he lost his way? And when he asks her for a drink of water - she wonders even more. The Jews have many rules about what they may and may not eat and drink. She knows that much at least - and she knows this man will be breaking the law if she lets him sip from her bucket.

So they talk about it. And while it is never really clear whether they are on the same wavelength - the woman understands that she wants what Jesus is offering her. “*Sir, give me this water,*” she says ….. which is when he tells her to go and fetch her husband. It is an abrupt change of subject - and leaves her with a choice. She can basically tell him to mind his own business, or she can lie. But she does neither. Instead - she squares her shoulders, and looks him right in the eye. “*I have no husband*,” she tells him. And with that shred of truth, he tells her the rest of the truth about herself - with no judgement, no condemnation in his words - just a simple stating of facts.

Immediately after Jesus describes her past - she says, *“I see that you are a prophet*” Now ‘seeing’ in John’s gospel is multi-layered. Beyond the literal interpretation, it is almost always connected with belief as well. So when the woman says “*I see that you are a prophet*” - she is, in fact, making a confession of faith. Why? Because Jesus has ‘***seen***’ her. He has seen her plight. He has recognized her, spoken with her, and offered her something of incomparable worth. This is not a story of morality so much as it is about ***identity.***  In the world in which she lives, she is a nobody. But she exists for Jesus - has worth, value, significance - in a way that she has not been seen and accepted before in her life. He offers her dignity and respect - and an identity that lifts her above her current plight.

Then - as if the intimacy of it all seems to make her feel too vulnerable - she changes the subject back to safer ground by trying to draw him into an argument about Jews versus Samaritans. “*Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain,”* she says to him*, “but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”*

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In her mind, it is obviously time to introduce some mental static - something to deflect where the conversation is going - so that the man with the x-ray eyes cannot read her so well. It does not work. You remember in all the old westerns - when there was to be a gunfight, it always happened at high noon. High noon - when the light was the brightest; high noon, when there were no shadows to hide in; high noon when everything is revealed - out in the open, stripped bare of any pretense. The gospel writer John is a master at symbolism. Remember, it is high noon at the well - the time of reckoning. So when the Samaritan woman steps back, Jesus steps toward her. He will not let her retreat. If she is determined to show him *less* of herself - then he will show her more of *himself.* *“I know that the Promised One of God is coming,*” she says. And Jesus says to her, “*I am he*.” Here is a moment of full disclosure, in which the triple outsider and the Promised One of God stand face to face - with no pretense about who they are. Both stand fully lit at high noon for one bright moment in time - while all the rules, all the taboos, all past mistakes - and all the history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground.

And that is how it still happens. In the presence of God, we can no longer hide behind our pretenses, our facades, our excuses, our justifications. God is the one in whose presence we are revealed for who we really are - the good and bad of it - the all of it, the hope of it. God is the one who meets us at high noon; the one who shows us who we are by showing us who ***God*** is - the One who crosses all boundaries, who breaks all rules, who accepts beyond all disguises - and whose love bubbles up inside us like a well that never goes dry.

The Gospel of John goes on to tell us that the woman was so filled to overflowing with what she had experienced that she ran back to her village to share with others - leaving her waterjar behind in her haste - symbolic in John’s gospel of anything that might hold her back.

And that is all that Jesus asks of us, as well, this morning. Having tasted the water of life and been filled to overflowing - we are invited to leave ***our*** waterjars behind:

- all that holds us back from being the best we can be;

- all our past mistakes, all our resentments, all our regrets;

- all the voices from the inside and the outside that tell us we are not loveable, not

 valued;

These are the waterjars that we are asked to leave behind in order to step fully into the ‘high noon’ light of God’s love and acceptance …. and then to go back to our homes, our work, our places of business and play - to share from the abundance of love that has been poured into ***our*** lives.