



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Gospel Passage Reference: John 4.5-42

+In the name of God: our three-in-one: loving Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

So, the Gospel we've just heard is well-known, and beloved and quite often misinterpreted.

It's often been used to point out how the Samaritan woman was saved from her life of promiscuity to be brought to a purified life by Jesus. Well, not surprisingly, knowing what I know about Jesus, that sounds a little too simple to me – and we know that life with Jesus is NEVER simple. So I've always found that reading a little suspect. I did some research and it turns out there's more going on here.

The main thing that we need to know about it, is that at every turn, this story is not what it seems. At every turn Jesus - and the Samaritan woman - do the unexpected.

So let me walk you through it.

Jesus had just had a long journey – he travelled from Judea to Galilee via Samaria – and that's the first plot twist right there because Jews and Samaritans were sworn enemies – centuries of political and religious conflict had passed between those two peoples and the enmity between them was on a scale of the protestant /catholic divide in Northern Ireland. It was deep and bitter with many casualties both physical and spiritual, on both sides.

So, passing through Samaria was a difficult decision. And yet Jesus made that decision for him and his disciples. You have to wonder why when many Jews would have taken the longer way round? Maybe it was just practical to take the shortest route. But I think there was more to it than that. I think that Jesus took the hardest way precisely because he and his disciples would have had to come face to face with their sworn enemies.

After sending the disciples off to the town for food, he rests alone at a well and a Samaritan woman approaches. Again, that in itself is really significant. You see, to a contemporary Jewish listener, this story would have sounded a whole lot like some other stories they were used to hearing – because, this was a first century, ‘boy meets girl’ story – really.

Traditionally a story beginning like this – with a meeting at a well, would have ended up in a marriage proposal. Think of your average Rom Com today and with its predictable plotline – or your favourite Hallmark Christmas movie.

And then think of the other times we hear of women meeting men at a well in scripture. All of these stories follow a similar pattern: a man travels to a foreign land, where he meets a woman who draws water for him. He apparently very much likes the way she draws that water, because then he meets the family and presto: the marriage is arranged!

Abraham chose Rebekah for his son Isaac that way in Genesis 24; Jacob meets Rachel at a well in Genesis 29; and Moses and Zipporah also met that way in Exodus 2 – and contemporary readers also knew those stories well, so in their hearing, this one with Jesus and the Samaritan woman was working up to a happy and expected ending.

But.

But Jesus is no ordinary man. And so this ‘boy meets girl’ story suddenly becomes a story about very different things.

First there’s the Samaritan woman’s surprise that he wants anything at all to do with her. That’s different. Then they start having a fairly sophisticated theological conversation about spiritual thirst. He plays with that familiar trope of the water a bit and offers a different take on something really ordinary – the water of life. The water that we can’t exist without. But Jesus is saying to this woman – that there is something else that she and all her people can’t live without: and that is the sustaining spiritual water of life – belief in the one true God.

So the next bit of the story is pretty deep, so bear with me. Then the Samaritan woman and Jesus, have a conversation about her husbands – apparently she had had five. I think they must have been pretty poor relationships. I don’t think she had found what she’d been looking for – to quote a famous song. Some must have divorced her (women couldn’t divorce men – only men women) and some must have died. But it was pretty clear that none of the marriages “took.”

And she was now with a sixth man – not yet her husband though – which Jesus points out – that’s an important nuance.

Now here's what I don't think this bit is about: about condemning those who have been divorced.

What I do think this is about is something really quite different. It seems that this was in fact a reference to the fact that the Samaritans had not stuck with the one true God but had been worshipping others too.

And using an old theme – one that the prophet Hosea used a lot – Jesus is calling the Samaritan woman – but understand here that she is a type for us, and for all who give our love in false and unsatisfying places - to other Gods or other idols – Jesus is calling this Samaritan woman to come to her one true love – the love that is the obvious answer to all her yearning for completion, the love that is above all other loves; to be faithful to the one true God and to worship and love God in spirit and truth. In fact, it turns out that Jesus is offering her a marriage proposal – just an alternative one; a spiritual one.

And it's pretty clear that this invitation to fall in love with the one true God has her thinking deeply. As the light is dawning she connects the dots between Jesus' invitation and the Messiah that has been promised by God. And then to her astonishment, she's met with Jesus's assertion that he is the Messiah – sitting right there with that water in his hand. He is the one who is expected – the one who's going to change everything.

Well, that's a pretty different plotline than the one either she, or the hearers of this story – expect.

Let me just say how totally “other” this story is. It's relayed from the point of view of a woman's concerns.

We know this because first, men did not talk to women in the heat of the noonday sun at a well - only at dawn and dusk.

Other times were not done. Second men did not have theological talks with women at wells. Not the place, not the time, in fact it was not the place or time for any woman ever in the ancient near east. And yet – and yet -- this is the longest conversation with a woman that Jesus has in any of the Gospels about anything – so I think it has an importance we need to notice.

And not only does she recognize him as the Messiah, then she goes and tells everyone she meets that this is the case! Again, not done. But because she is so utterly convinced that he is who he says he is, because her witness is heart deep and genuine – come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! She is believed and many do just that: come to Jesus.

This woman was an outlier – clearly. And Jesus spent a lot of time with outliers – but this woman was the ultimate outlier – a Samaritan, female and it must be said, brave.

In fact, there was a lot of bravery in this meeting and in her witness – for them both. But you know, Jesus always bravely cuts to the truth. He always goes beyond social norms and conventions.

As he says, God loves those who worship in spirit and truth but I think we can see as well, that God loves those who seek in spirit after truth – that's what this woman was doing – and Jesus blesses that profoundly.

I love this story because it takes an ordinary narrative and subverts it for kingdom purposes. Instead of receiving yet another ordinary marriage proposal – probably doomed to failure as the others had been - this woman, the Samaritan in all of us - receives an invitation to a love that will transform her life – in the here and now and eternally speaking.

And this story, instead of enforcing human division and enmity, becomes about redeeming cultural and religious divides. Well, actually it becomes about something even more radical than that – it's a story about disregarding those things altogether in favour of things that are truly important.

It becomes a story about love that transcends nationality, transcends gender, and certainly transcends religious division.

But most importantly, it becomes a story about a bigger and more expansive and forgiving love than we can almost ever manage on our own because it's a story about God's love.

Which is all to say what I said at the very beginning: that Jesus always acts in ways we don't expect.

So how does this story connect with us today in the midst of the Coronavirus crisis? Well it comes down to this: We are Christians. And Christians try over and over to pattern our lives after Jesus the Christ.

So. Go and act like Jesus.

Let me tell you what I mean: Amidst all the thoughtful and necessary precautions being taken due to the spread of the coronavirus, we have sadly, seen the beginnings of another outbreak— the social contagion of fear and anxiety; of selfishness and division: look no further than the empty shelves that once contained stacks of toilet paper or essential foods.

We live in a time when all our expectations are being turned upside down. So okay, let's be a little radical about that. How about we opt for love instead of fear.

Instead of an outbreak of fear, let's encourage the breaking in of the Spirit.

While keeping ourselves safe and while lovingly protecting our vulnerable neighbours with physical distancing as we've been advised to do, we can still do the unexpected and practice the radical love of Jesus.

Through spiritual discipline, engage in generosity instead of hoarding; constant loving contact instead of isolation. Call those who are alone, or marginalized and make sure they're okay – spend yourselves in being present with them – especially if it's a sacrifice of your patience and time and you wouldn't normally do it. You are being Christ to them.

Send a text, a Facebook message, a tweet. Send a card – and this is important: forward a cheque, make an e-transfer – especially if it's something you wouldn't normally do. You are being Christ to those who are in need.

And maybe we don't give in to the social contagion of panic and fear. Maybe we don't snag more toilet paper or canned beans than we need, . . . Remember that we are Christians and we pray for our daily bread – for enough this day - and we pray and give to those who don't have enough.

I could go on, but you get the gist.

When we feel the urge to isolate and take care of only ourselves, when we feel the shuddering of our souls in fear and self-protection, think then of the living water of the Christ – the one true love of all who seek for truth - and like Jesus, do the unexpected: channel, with intentionality, the radical love of God for the other. And together we'll be transformed in this life and the next.

+In the name of God, the three in one. Amen.