

SermonBytes – A well of transformation

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I was grateful this week to Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny, who in a meeting with Donald Trump (as they were both posing for a photo op for St Patrick's day) reminded the World and the Donald and his US isolationists that St Patrick himself was an immigrant. And that many Americans had immigrated from Ireland. And that the US had always had a great pride in its open welcome. And it was immigrants who had helped make America great.

Our Lenten journey through the gospel of John takes us once again into uncharted territory where Jesus encounters another outsider in the midst of rather dubious circumstances.

Last week's encounter in our lectionary readings took place in the cool dark of night, the shadows echoing with questions and doubt as Nicodemus the Pharisee came to meet Jesus. This week, the bright noonday sun shines its unflattering light. It is not the beautiful, glowing light of dawn or dusk but stark, bright sunlight of midday, which throws an unflattering spotlight on every wrinkle and scar - every failure, every regret, and all those things that weigh us down. Our failings and our flaws have nowhere to hide at the height of the noonday sun. Just ask the woman of Samaria

Last week talked with Nicodemus, the "big shot" religious leader, a learned, respected figure in the community. Though Nicodemus was a powerful man, he also knew that Jesus was trouble and so he sneaks in to visit Jesus in the dark of night. But no matter how he tried, Nicodemus, the learned and thoughtful one, just could not get his mind wrapped around what Jesus was saying with that exquisitely human image of being "born again" to describe the need for spiritual transformation.

This brief, night-time exchange was frustrating for the Pharisee, but, for John's early Christian community, it was a sermon on God's love and purposes, and a reminder that we come closer to God, not by machinations of the mind but rather by that which is understood deep in the soul.

This week, we sit with Jesus in the sweltering heat of the noonday sun and again an encounter, this time with a woman – a Samaritan.

The Jews and the Samaritans are actually cousins. But from the dark side of the family tree. There are many different, complicated reasons for it, but everything adds up to helping each group feel more justified in hating the other groups' guts. If you remember the response to Wurtherton in Corner Gas. Multiply that by 100

It's ironic, and fitting, that this scene unfolds by a deep well - an ancient well, Jacob's well, one that goes back to the early days of Israel. Jesus, sits there, by the well with water so very close but so far as the Samaritan woman points out so aptly: "The well is deep – and you have no rope – no jug"

A woman walks up to the well, at noon hour Wait – did I read that right? Yes noon hour. No one comes to the well at that hour without carrying a whole lot of baggage. That literally shouts – “I can’t handle them and their stares and their gossip”. The other women would have visited earlier together during the cooler hours of the day, conversations would have flitted and fomented.

But this woman has chosen to come to the well – at noon –alone. She does not speak to begin with but her presence there and then. Well it screams isolation, loneliness --- The Unholy Other.

Jesus invites her into a conversation, asking her for a drink of water. She responds like proper woman of the day "How is it that you, a Jew, asks a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Dares, as you can read there. Jews didn't share things in common with Samaritans, things like water cups or of course conversation.

But this woman is "other" in other ways besides being a Samaritan. Her husbands have divorced her or died. Over and alone again the echo surrounds her: Alone – alone – Alone.

But If anyone knows alone it is Jesus Remember Jesus in the desert, going off on his own to pray? Or at Cana Mother –“Not now - it is not yet my time”, after the feeding of the 5000. All they want is miracles. And to the disciples in the boat in the middle of the storm – “Have you no faith?”.

And so at the well the solitary saviour asks this lonely other, “Will you give me a drink?”. The conversation - which is one of the longest that Jesus has with anyone - soon turns as Jesus offers "living water", which literally means a stream of flowing water. That must sound really good to someone who carries that heavy jar back to her home each day, during the heat of the noonday sun.

The conversation is at first stilted by the same problem that Nicodemus had - concrete thinking. But this Samaritan outsider, this woman grasps what Nicodemus cannot. This Jew, this man in front of her– this stranger - he brings her truth and recognition, acceptance and the living water of God's grace

And, unlike Nicodemus who keeps saying, "How can this be?", this woman, out of her understanding of her own need and a marvelous openness to Jesus and all that he offers, asks, "Sir, give me this water!".

Notice something else – even though Jesus obviously knows her, He does not judge her. He does not ask her to repent or tell her that she's welcome to the living water, so that she can change her sinful ways.

As the woman grasps that Jesus is a prophet (for he knows "all that I have ever done") she doesn't worry about explaining or defending herself. instead, she engages him in an "interfaith dialogue." Jesus talks theology with a woman. She asks him about the

most pressing question that divides the Jews and Samaritans. The hot-button religious issue that divides and alienates them and even makes them fear one another: where is the proper place to worship God?

Here a different translation of Jesus' answer, from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, which is helpful:

"...the time is coming," Jesus says, "it has, in fact, come – (Literally – is here and now). when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It's who you are and the way you live that count before God.

Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people God is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before God ."

This is what is important to John and the early church - meeting Jesus. Many of us know profound gratitude for how God in the fullness of grace has accepted us and loved us.

Like the woman at the well, we have at times felt alone and isolated. And yet even though maybe may see ourselves as unworthy - the least likely to be called to spread the good news.

We know that God does not wait for us to be perfect but rather offers us extravagant love, just as we are. This encounter with God in Jesus, this extravagant hospitality and profound acceptance is transformative. Meeting one another and worshipping God together, simply and honestly, as our true selves, alters us forever just as surely as meeting Jesus. It transforms the life of that solitary but spirited woman by the well.

If any of you were fans of Paul Harvey's, he gives a wonderful follow-up to this encounter. In Orthodox Christianity and in the early church writings, the Samaritan woman is named as equal to an apostle and evangelist, her response to Jesus being the first that comes with transformative understanding and effective evangelism. Unlike Nicodemus who comes in the dark and leaves in the dark, this woman comes at noon day and sees the light – and she believes. In Orthodox Christianity her faith is said to have surpassed that of some of the other disciples. Later, the Byzantine Christians would name her St. Photini - The woman of light.

The impact of this encounter changes her life and the lives of those in her city, all because she was able to get beyond what divided them and to find the faith that drew them together.

If you go to Palestine today, just outside of the ancient Samaritan village of Sychar, you can still find the well of Jacob. Only now, the well is found inside an Orthodox Nunnery, in side of a church, the Church of St Photini, in honor of this the first of the great evangelists who was an outsider – A Samaritan, an outcast – living at the edges of the

norms of her day; a woman who came to the well during the heat of the day and there met Jesus. Photini – Samaritan – Woman – Evangelist – Woman of Light

And that as they say is the rest of the story.