

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on March 27, 2011

Crossroads United Church

Exodus 17: 1-7

John 4: 5-42

The story is told of a Jewish Senior Rabbi who sent two younger rabbi's to Paris France to see if The City of Lights would be a good place to establish a synagogue. The first returned saying that Paris was the last place where a synagogue should be planted. There were bordello's and drunkenness and burlesque shows, and the sacredness and traditions of Judaism would never succeed. The second rabbi returned and shared that he thought that a synagogue would thrive in Paris. There were academies, artists, writers and philosophers. The moral of the story: we see what we want to see.

Some see the glass as half empty and others as half full. Some see potential and opportunity and others see barrenness and hardship. Some see hope and others only despair. Some can be so overwhelmed by the big picture that the more subtle escapes the view. We have lost appreciation for the small little influences and see only the more obvious and overt. Seeing through the narrow lens of the negative is a common thread woven throughout both of the scriptures for this morning. Both concern the human need for water. Both challenge the leadership and authority of the principal characters.

In the Hebrew text it is water for sustenance of life. The Children of Israel grow thirsty while wandering in the wilderness and accuse their leader, Moses, of being inept. They seem to have forgotten how hard their lives were in slavery in Egypt and even begin to lament their exodus. Life in the wilderness is challenging, and when their survival is threatened they begin to complain bitterly. Their new found freedom comes with cost- the cost of eking out their survival- and these poor slaves are not accustomed to having to forage for food, or find water in the parched and arid desert. So they turn on their liberator and leader. And poor Moses seems equally as ill prepared for the task.

When life gets demanding in freedom, the children of Israel see the comfort in slavery. “Why did you free us from slavery in Egypt only so that we might die of thirst in the desert?” And in exasperation Moses cried out to God, “What am I to do with these people? They are ready to stone me.” And down through the eons when life becomes challenging and difficult we also wonder if God is with us or not.

The water of the gospel is about a different kind of water. Much has been made about Jesus conversing with a woman- which would not have been the custom of the day for a man. Women were not considered a man’s equal, and a man would simply not have a conversation with a woman who was not known to him. But there is much in the story that seems incongruous with the mores of the day. Normally women would go for water in the early morning long before the noon tide heat of the day. And yet here is a woman sitting at the well in the heat of the day. A Jew would not normally have any dealings with a Samaritan, and yet here is Jesus engaging the woman in lively and deep conversation. Nor would a Jew in all probability ask for anything from the hand of a Samaritan who was considered less pure than Jews, but Jesus asks the woman for a drink. And what becomes clear to the reader is that while both passages seem to be about the human need for water, what they actually are about is tension

The Children of Israel are finding life in the wilderness very difficult, and they question the power and presence of God among them. And while their life in slavery in Egypt was laborious and difficult, they were provided with bread and water as they toiled. They thirst for water, but they thirst for some kind of affirmation that God is with Moses, and that God is among them as they tabernacle. The fourth chapter of John is about religious tension and a church which- in its origins- sought to overcome them. Jesus is more than willing to put the past that has delineated and separated Jew and Samaritan behind and be inclusive.

The separation between Samaritan and Jew goes back to antiquity when the northern Jews, who were not carried off into exile, permitted Alexander the Great to build for them a temple on Mount Gerizim. The returning exiles under the leadership of

Ezra could not stomach any shrine except the one restored by them in Jerusalem. The separation between the two groups increased in the closing centuries before the birth of Christ. So in this text Jesus is demonstrating knowledge of the woman and her culture and beliefs. He was aware that Samaritans consorted with enemies, engaged in false worship, and would have been cognizant of everything that Jews of Judah would have thought the kingdom of Israel in the north was guilty of. But it mattered not an iota to the Son of God, who saw the woman deserving of everything that he had come to offer the world.

His interaction with a woman shocked his disciples, and he may have lost some ground that day, but he has modeled how to deal with wounds and divisions. In this text Jesus is portrayed as the reconciler of ancient enemies. And we of the faith are not strangers to the lines of demarcation that continue to undermine the man and his message. Jews and Samaritans can be redefined as black and white, catholic and protestant, Christian and Muslim, immigrant and native born, French and English, rich and poor, male and female, gay and straight. Even the church of Christ can be traced back to one holy, catholic and apostolic church in the once upon a time, and now we are rife with denominations and churches split from other churches and synods. The separation between Jew and Samaritan can be given a different label but the Jesus of John's gospel is on record as unequivocally against exclusivity, and separation.

What started as a conversation about water between Jesus and a woman snowballed into a theological discourse and then became an opportunity for everyone to see with new eyes. The woman, not only recognized Jesus as messiah, but she was able to move beyond mores and customs of the day and share this with the very ones that heretofore had made her life difficult because of her sordid and sundry relationships. The crowd was intrigued by her insight and came to see for themselves. The disciples saw again that the ministry of Jesus was not limited to a select few, nor was it bound by conventions of the day. And it began with Jesus recognizing the worth in a woman.

For Jesus and the author of John, and for Moses and the chronicler of the

wilderness story, the issues are very similar. For the one group, experiencing the challenges of liberation made the oppression of slavery seem more attractive. For the other, it was the issue of what had long been entrenched and understood as the norm. Jesus dares to decry that the invisible lines of demarcation separating sect and convention be obliterated. Jesus challenges us to see all people as sons and daughters of God and worthy of grace. For Moses, the questioning of his leadership was a testing also of the divine presence of God. And many continue to desire to see tangible proof as a requisite to believe in things unseen-especially when the way before is clouded and uncertain.

There was a time in my life when I would describe myself as living in the desert. I had left the security of a position that I had held for many years because I felt that I had taken the people as far as I could. I was denied Employment Insurance and received nary a nibble on any position for which I applied. As debt began to accumulate and my sense of self was eroding, I began to feel as though I had wasted half of my life in responding to this vocation. I was feeling very sorry for myself and my bruised ego was precipitating a crisis of faith such that I had never experienced before. I would like to say that the water emerged from the rock in a very literal way but the process was slower and more intentional. It began with recalling a mantra that had sustained me in the past when I was at another time living in the valley of the shadow. Like a quiet voice of faith that seeps from a place deep within and eventually penetrates our conscious mind I was hearing, "It matters not what brought you to this place for here is where you are. What matters is where you go from here."

I could rail against God like the Children of Israel railing against Moses- demanding proof of providence and that providence had taken special note of my plight. I could demonstrate a similar disdain as the disciples who took exception to Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman and hold him in some kind of contempt. I could turn my back on the religious teaching of dedicated lay people and professors and join in the chorus of those who decry that God is dead and religion but an opiate. Or I could try to embrace the hardship of uncertainty in faith- faith in the support of my husband and

family; faith in myself to withstand the challenges, and faith in God to somehow penetrate the wounds of my bruised ego and battered sense of vocation and offer balm. Sometimes the water that refreshes when we are between a rock and a hard place comes in tiny droplets of support.

There were the reassurances of my husband that we would survive-not only physically but as a family. There was the counsel to embrace the uncertainty as an opportunity to discern my priorities. And the encouragement to live the remainder of my life-personally and professionally-spirit lead rather than ego driven. Oh I have my lapses when ego speaks in a louder voice than the inner voice, but I am clay in the hands of the potter-a work in progress.

Jesus seemed to have lived his entire life between a rock and a hard place. While still an infant he incurred the wrath of Herod and his ministry was fraught with the threats from both Jerusalem and Rome. He knew temptation, betrayal, loneliness, suffering and finally death. When I begin to feel as though I deserve better because of who I am and what I do, I get mental images of what Jesus endured and soon the humble pie steams before me. And from the wellspring of my soul comes the proverbial which both taunts and tames: It matters not what brought us to this place, for here is where we are. What matters is where we go from here."May God bless us with water from a stone to sustain and refresh in the valley of the shadow and beside still waters. Amen.