

Riverside United Church  
February 4, 2018

Scripture Lesson: John 4: 5-42

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,  
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,  
lead us to deeper understanding of you,  
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

**“Come and See - And Drink Deeply”**

25 years ago, I was very involved with the Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Misconduct committee of the United Church in Saskatchewan. It was a time when the policy of the church was adopted and so there was a great deal of education happening to explain and interpret the policy. I have been thinking about that work over the past few weeks as incidents of sexual misconduct have become quite public and it has been surprising to me that parliament Hill and Queen’s Park and other political organizations have not had policies and procedures in place for handling complaints in place.

One of the educational tools that we used in those workshops was a chart that showed various factors that help to analyze the power and vulnerability of persons in any particular situation, encounter, relationship. Factors such as age, gender, physical stature and ability, economic status, race, sexual orientation, intellectual and social resources create situations where the power equation can be great and different or quite mutual.

I was thinking about that scale as I thinking about this truly astonishing story that we reflect on today from John’s gospel. Jesus has an encounter with a Samaritan woman at the well at the height of the day.

Last week we pondered the story in chapter 3 of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. And now we have a story that offers great contrast - day vs. night, a named man vs. unnamed woman, a Jew vs. a Samaritan. It is interesting that his conversation with Nicodemus which would have not crossed many barriers of expectation was hidden at night, and yet this conversation with a woman - which crossed many barriers and social taboos was at a public spot - the well - in the middle of the day. Jesus uses his greater power in this situation to engage a more vulnerable person into conversation and the result is a powerful conversation that breaks down barriers and enables both of them to drink deeply of the living water of compassion, truth and life.

As we continue our Epiphany path through the early chapters of John, the invitation to Come and See, an invitation that is first issued to Nathanael in the first chapter, continues to remind us that following Jesus is not a destination, but a journey into the depth of who we are and into the expanse of mystery, love and a vision for life defined by hope, justice and peace.

The living water quenches our physical thirst, but like most stories and images in John also has a deeper multi layered meaning as it also talks about a thirst for meaning and purpose - an eternal dimension that saves us from selfishness, despair and indifference.

As we move through these neat stories from John, I am also reflecting on the book *The Great Spiritual Migration* by Brian McLaren. He speaks of how the biblical record is mostly stories of migration of people on the move - physical, spiritual or both. And he talks about the spiritual migrations that he sees the North American church needing to make in this time.

Last week, with the help of the Nicodemus story, I spoke about the spiritual migration of focusing less on a system of beliefs and more on a way of life rooted in love.

Today, the story of the woman at the well highlights for me the missional migration that Brian McLaren suggests is needed as we identify less with organized religion and more with an organizing religion of Jesus' followers dedicated to healing the planet, building peace and working for the common good of all.

That may seem like a lot to put into this story of a conversation at the well between Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman - but Jesus was breaking down barriers, ignoring social taboos and offering an example of the possibility that happens when we have conversation outside of established places, circles and patterns.

The focus of the conversation at the well was the gift of life-giving water. Our human thirst for the eternal crosses barriers of human construction and my goodness religion has been good at building barriers to human interaction and respect.

Tom Harper, in this book *For Christ's Sake*, opens with a parable about a spring of living water found in the desert. As it becomes known and crowds start to gather, then certain rules need to be found to control things. Only certain people are allowed access, walls are built to protect the spring and as the control systems with various rules and regulations become more and more elaborate the reality of the spring and its gift of living water gets forgotten.

Has the church built too many walls - rules and regulations, doctrines and traditions that it is hard to remember the basic purpose is the drink the living water revealed by Jesus?

And is the spiritual seeking human being - able to navigate the through all that stuff to find a path to the well?

Brian McLaren advocates that the church needs to find ways to shift the word organized from a being in the past tense move it away from the Christensen model, to it becoming organizing a present tense verb an organizing religion that finds ways to serve the common good. Because as we know there are lots of ways that the human need for purpose and meaning and making a difference in the world are fulfilled.

As I read this section of the book, I am reminded of a report that The United Church of Canada adopted 20 years ago called Mending the World. It was a renewed ecumenical vision of the church working for unity - not just with other churches but also with various community groups - with a faith base or not. As with most statements of the United Church, it was not something brand new but a recognition of what was already happening as congregations were involved with food banks and peace groups and anti-poverty movements.

When the AIDS crisis in Africa was most public, it made sense for church folks to be part of the Stephen Lewis Foundation network of grandmothers groups rather than establishing a separate system.

As a established groups and networks of connection, churches have the ability to offer meeting space, leadership skills, resources - to coalitions and networks that form to build peace, heal the planet, welcome the stranger and work for the common good of all.

Over the past few months I have begun to attend a monthly steering table meeting gathering that the South East Ottawa Community Health Centre has been organizing. Various community groups are invited to gather together to learn who each other are and to explore needs of the community and learn about the agencies and resources in the community. At the table there have been reps from community associations, community housing, police, politician's offices, service agencies, etc. The group has never been the same, but it is a model that I have decided to make a priority each month because it has the potential to break down barriers and isolation and to work for the common good.

On Thursday afternoon, Clara and I met with a couple of persons from one of the community associations as part of the Community Engagement process. It was a good conversation about what they are doing and what they perceive as the needs of this part of the city, they also asked us about what we do. We didn't meet at a well - but rather at a coffee shop and maybe coffee shops are the community wells of our context - places where persons of various backgrounds gather to quench thirst, but also satisfy the need for human interaction and conversation.

We live in our context with this reality that many identify with the phrase "spiritual but not religious". It is an intriguing reality and not one that I think should be dismissed or ignored. There are layers of meaning to such a description that can't be revealed through speculation or theory - but rather through conversation and connection. And if we wait for persons who identify themselves in that way to come into the welcoming doors of the church, we may be waiting a long time.

Jesus invited his followers to Come and See - and part of that journey takes us into places where we have never been before - and amidst the various power differentials in our time and lives - to find ways to work towards mutuality and a sharing of power and wisdom.

It all sounds so daunting and exhausting - yet also full of possibility and promise. The good news is that we don't have to save the church or the world by ourselves. There is a Spirit at work on that and we are invited to catch up to that Spirit and to join the migration crossing into new territory of thought and mission.

The woman at the well wondered how she could receive the gift of living water - because everything she had ever been taught or experienced would have told her she was excluded - but Jesus offered her that gift of drink - but also of a dignity and worth that empowered her to tell others of the this truth and love.

As we live our lives, as we re-imagine the church - let's not forget the spring of living water - and what it offers. Let us drink deeply and in that gift have the thirst for worth, meaning, purpose and hope fulfilled as we continue to follow the way and love known in Jesus. Amen.