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Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Lent 3 Year A
March 12, 2023

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Three years ago, the readings we hear this morning were the last to be offered in this parish space before nearly all churches closed their doors and shifted their worship online, thinking that we would be back open two weeks later. It was, in fact, the Very Rev. Dr. Battle, who preached that Sunday, and whom we are so glad to have now as our colleague and friend. The readings this morning are the last ones in our lectionary to be read through the lens of the pandemic and fear and isolation.

That week may have seemed a lifetime ago or like a clear, visceral memory—time has a way of making itself known in the body, in the heart and in the soul. And in this morning's gospel of Jesus and the Samaritan woman—depicted by LaFarge right there (point to painting), time makes itself known again.

The woman comes to the well in the middle of the day. That's our first clue about this woman, this conversation, this community. The time to visit a well was first thing in the morning before the heat set in, or in the cool of the evening, and even this 21st century New England girl knows that a midday well visit in the Near East two thousand years ago was just madness. Why she chooses this time is unclear. Perhaps she isn't welcome to join in with the rest of the crowds in the morning. Perhaps she chooses not to join in the throngs of others at the well, either because she is seeking solitude or because she knows that she is not welcome. In any case, it is the middle of the day when she meets Jesus—and as we know from last week's visit of Nicodemus in the middle of the night to Jesus, in the Gospel of John, time matters. It tells us something.

The conversation between this woman and Jesus is extraordinary. Not only it is the longest conversation between Jesus and any individual recorded in the gospels, it's a *good one*. Not to use battle imagery here, but they are evenly matched and both seem to enjoy the repartee that weaves in and out of political, religious, personal and practical places.

Jesus asks her for water. She reminds him as a Jew that it isn't his custom to receive water from someone like her (a Samaritan). He replies that he could offer her Living Water, had she asked for it, and she would never have had to visit the well again. She thinks this is a thrilling proposal, but is curious about how Jesus will actually get it from the well to his mouth, as he came unprepared for water gathering without bucket or cup, so perhaps he isn't quite set up either for endless hydration either.

And then Jesus- in a spate of either decorum (wells were well known pickup spots in scripture) or angling, tells her to bring her husband to share in this water and conversation.

She does not lie to Jesus, let's be clear. There is a difference between telling a lie and telling a complete stranger her entire life story, the story which has possibly made her the person to be at this well at high noon, and isolated from others. So she appropriately curtails and replies that she has no husband. Full stop. It's her shortest sentence in the whole of this conversation. You can almost hear the clipped edge of her voice even through two thousand years of translations.

There are some traditions which paint the Samaritan woman as 'loose' because of her history of multiple husbands and current relationship status lacking a ring. We kind of love this nebulous, self-righteous idea that Jesus loves the pitiable, wayward ones—especially women-- bringing them back to the fold, full of contrition for all the things they had done previously, hands neatly folded, eyes cast down. A model of purity and amendment of life.

And yet this is not the direction the conversation takes.

Jesus tells the woman her own story. She has had five husbands. She is living with another man and is without the safety net of marriage, more than likely not of her own volition. These aren't euphemisms for sexual relationships, but rather a searing indictment of how her humanity, her life, has been placed in hands outside her control. Whether she is the inheritor of Levirate marriage (where if the husband dies, the wife is then married to the next oldest unmarried brother of the man, and so on), or if she was trafficked and abused, or if there is some other reason for her history, we don't know. And it isn't important to Jesus.

There, in the heat of the day, when the woman operates within the confines of her own isolation from others, Jesus repeats her story to her. And instead of hearing it as accusation, or denigration, somehow when it comes from the voice of Jesus, the woman hears it as prophecy. She is known. Not judged, but known. Her history—storied as it is—is not used as a weapon or instrument of shame. When Jesus tells it, when it is brought into the light of day, it not only serves as a confirmation of Jesus' messiahship, it is literally the cry that she will take on as an evangelist: "Come see a man who told me everything I have ever done!"

The story that has created isolation for this woman becomes the door of her liberation.

And ours.

There is no one here in this room, or our extended sanctuary online, who has an unstoried past. Lent is the particular time when we are invited to clean out those stories, sweeping clean the corners of our souls and hearts we'd much rather turn a blind eye towards, ignoring the truly unkempt, half finished, shame-filling spots we simply close the door to when guests come over. We tell our stories in ways which skip over the less-than-flattering personal depictions, and whether we do this to survive socially or survive emotionally doesn't make a difference. We do it so that we don't have to get our water from the well in the high heat of the day, alone by choice or alone by exclusion.

And because we are a tradition steeped in our connection to one another, the living to the dead and to those yet to come, we are also a community, congregation, and nation, with a storied past. As a gathered people—spiritually or nationally, we tell our stories in ways which skip over the

less-than-flattering moments, whether we have agency in our choices, or whether they were foisted upon us. Time and again we tell ourselves the stories we would rather hear and live into, the stories which allow us to exist in the comfortable social circle of the well in the cool of morning.

And yet Jesus knows our stories. Jesus knows our history. And if we let him, Jesus will tell us our own story in such a way that we choose not to run from it, but allow it to liberate us; to redeem us; allow us to drop the fear of being wrong, or ill-informed, or naïve, or embarrassed, because God's own Word is that of breaking the bindings which isolate us from each other and from God.

There is a well-worn and only semi-funny joke about Episcopalians: how many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Ten. One to change it and nine to say how much they liked the old one better.

Sometimes remaining in the story we're used to hearing, and which we may even claim as our own, is easier than encountering the chance of new life.

The Samaritan woman puts down her hard-won jug of water, and leaves it at the well of Jacob, and enters into the town of people whom she had worked so hard to avoid and proclaims to them, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I had done!' And with that as evangelism, she brings those who would shun her to Jesus. She brings them to the well. She gives them living water and to themselves, fully and wholly. Without shaming them, or blaming them, or herself, her liberation from her old worn story is the agent of *their* grace and salvation.

Time has a way of making itself known to the body, and the body remembers it. Our bodies, *this* body of Christ right here, remembers the stories which made us—and Jesus' Good News is that those stories are ready to be unbound and given new life, given water too deep for any bucket, moving in such a way that we are brought along with it, not stagnant ponds, but living streams. And in that water we are given new life.

So get your buckets ready, and bring your own cups. For it is time to drink deeply from it.

Amen.