

"Sometimes God Draws Near." Ex. 17:1-7; Ps. 95; John 4:5-42
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
Third Sunday in Lent, February 24, 2008

Jesus is on his way from Jerusalem traveling north to Galilee. There has been some kind of run-in with the Pharisees and it seems to center around John the Baptist's ministry. Jesus leaves Jerusalem but he doesn't take the usual route that would take him around Samaria. Instead, he travels straight north through the region of Samaria. John doesn't tell us why. All he says is that Jesus had to go that way.

This was unheard of. Most Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans. The dislike went back 700 years. Samaria was the area of the old kingdom of Israel. These were the 10 tribes that broke away from the 2 southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

After the Assyrians destroyed Samaria and carried the people off into exile they brought in foreigners from 5 other conquered countries to populate the place.

These foreigners brought with them their pagan religions and the remaining Jews intermarried with them and - as far as the righteous Jews of the South were concerned - these Samaritan Jews perverted their religious and family life in the process.

So Samaritans were looked down upon and contact with them was off limits.

But for some reason, Jesus chooses to head to Galilee in the north by way of Samaria instead of the preferred route along the Jordan River.

Why did he do this?

One possible reason has to do with where this story appears in John's gospel.

You may recall, last week's story dealt with the Jewish leader Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night asking spiritual questions. Jesus was in Jerusalem, near to the Temple.

Now, Jesus couldn't possibly be any farther away. In fact, everything about this story runs counter to last week's encounter between Jesus with Nicodemus. These stories are as different as, ... well, as different as night and day. He is in Samaria, not Jerusalem. It is noon, not night. He is with a woman, not a man.

Nicodemus is the model Jew: a man, a Pharisee, a leader. He has a name. This woman is the model of everything that stands outside the norm: a woman, a Samaritan, at the bottom of the rung in her own society. She has no name.

Nicodemus took the initiative and came to Jesus by night and left in the dark. With this woman, Jesus took the initiative at midday and made it possible for her to come to the light.

Nicodemus knew he needed something and came with questions, believing that Jesus was sent from God. This woman only thought she needed to complete her chore at the Well, not knowing Jesus from Adam, except to know enough that he was a Jew and she was a Samaritan and what he was doing was just, plain wrong.

But, as their conversation unfolds, (and it is the longest conversation that Jesus had with anyone in the Bible), it is clear

that she needs more than a jug of water from the Well. It is also clear that she is coming to realize that Jesus is more than just a passing traveler. She goes from addressing him as "Sir" to perceiving him as a "prophet" to being willing to entertain the possibility that this Jesus is the one true Messiah of God.

Even her way of talking to the townspeople shows her own surprise. "He can't be the Messiah, can he?" She is willing to believe that God is at work in her own neighborhood, calling out to her, offering her what her soul longs and thirsts for: acceptance without judgment, a standing and a place in God's eyes, rest and peace, and the promise of eternal life.

There are many who run from God, expecting to be judged and condemned and cast into the outer darkness. But what a different perspective of God's grace comes into view when we see the experience of this Samaritan woman in the hands of Jesus. Clearly he knows her through and through, but does not pass judgment on her. He sees her as a Seeker, not a Sinner. For her, God draws near. And then she, in turn, points the way to God for others. She is the first evangelist!

You know, we hear about her living situation and we tend to draw all kinds of conclusions about her morality and pass judgment on her. But Jesus isn't concerned about her checkered past, only her present and future. He is the one who is able to draw her in, not push her away.

I have to wonder how different a place the Church might be if we had the ability to practice and model what Jesus does with her here in this story. What would the Church be like that was less concerned about maintaining boundaries and more concerned about reaching out with the love of Christ? How many other folks

might have their needs met if they knew it was safe to walk through the door of the church, if they knew they could be known by someone else who wouldn't pass judgment on them?

This seems to be the turning point: when she realizes that Jesus knows her and still has a place for her. She is transformed from an outcast into an evangelist who points the way for others to come near to Jesus and find their needs and desires met as well.

Jesus is the one who offers to quench our thirst and set us free. "But I'm not thirsty and I don't feel imprisoned," you say? There's nothing in our lives that is out of whack, nothing amiss? There's no need for forgiveness and love, no burden of guilt or shame?

Or do we live with a past that has piled up around us so much that it's almost like we are imprisoned and unable to move forward? Are we fighting with a sense of hopelessness that won't leave us alone? Are we so spiritually dead that we are like emotional zombies? Are we so wracked with worry about our lives and our families and our future that we don't know where to turn?

It may sound like a cliché but here's a thought: Turn to Jesus! He offers us much more than just a door out of that dead-end life. He draws near and offers us a new way of thinking about ourselves and others. Trusting in Jesus gives us a reason to believe that God is "for" us and not "against" us.

Why was Jesus in Samaria that day? Could it be that he was doing what he came into the world to do: To seek and save the lost and to break down every dividing wall between us?

Isn't this the good news we celebrate today: That God in Christ has drawn near to us, coming into our lives and has meeting us right where we live? It is good news that God has transformed us from the people we were to the people God created us to be: forgiven and set free from guilt and fear!

Jesus doesn't come before us as righteous Judge but rather as the one who seeks after us and engages us and reminds us that nothing is hidden from God and that we need not be afraid to draw near to him.

And so we draw near today because God has drawn near to us. We are invited to draw from the living water of Christ, to know his forgiveness and his love, and to reach out to others and point the way back to him.

Thanks be to God and let us pray:

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