

- Exodus 17:1-7
- Romans 5:1-11
- John 4:5-42
- Psalm 95

As much as we seem to be in a time of incredible fear right now. And anyone who tells you fear not is not really to be trusted, because if you're not afraid right now in the case of this pandemic, you are someone who is not in touch with just how scary life has become these past few days.

But this is not the first pandemic that we have had. We have had other pandemics in the past, not only in 1917 when we had the flu epidemic, but we also have had a pandemic with HIV and AIDS. And as I was thinking through what was going on with this over the past few days, I've been thinking a lot about an exchange that happened when I was in college and there was a friend that my cousin Carla had who was named Drake. And Drake was the first out gay person that she had as a friend.

This was a time of pandemic, was a time in which there was a lot of anxiety about hosting people that were gay, hosting people that had any kind of risk for HIV infection, not really knowing what was involved with HIV and how it was transmitted between people. In any event, Carla wanted to have Drake over to her house and her mother, my Aunt Corky, she decided to make a way to welcome Drake into the home.

He came just the way all of her friends did around the back and into the kitchen. And we sat down at the kitchen and I was invited over because this was going to be a kind of small party of sorts. And we came in and my Aunt Corky announced to me that she was tired of doing dishes, that we were going to actually eat on paper plates. So she put out all these paper plates and we all had kind of a meal on paper plates.

And then after Drake left, my Aunt Corky carefully just kind of pushed the paper plates into the trash. And I realized afterwards that she had done the paper plates because she had been so terrified to welcome Drake into her kitchen. She was terrified that somehow she would contract the illness. Somehow she would become HIV positive.

And over the years, I've looked back on that party and I've had these moments in which I've kind of seen this as a really problematic moment in which someone went kind of halfway instead of all the way in terms of welcoming someone into their home.

And over the years, I have sympathized with Drake and the fact that he felt such incredible stigma being an openly gay man at that time, in that time of incredible fear and a time of incredible panic and a time in which so many people were dying and so many people were getting sick.

And I used to look for many years upon that exchange as kind of a moment of kind of awkward hospitality that didn't go all the way. But this past week, as I was thinking about what is entailed in everything that we are doing and thinking about all that we're trying to do to somehow protect the vulnerable and make space for connections and create social distancing so that people don't get infected to try to limit the spread of this virus, COVID-19.

And I've come to see that what my Aunt Corky did, while maybe halfway, she went further than most people did to make people who were stigmatized, people who were outcast, people who were marginalized, people who were suffering welcome in her kitchen.

And so I found my memory changing, I've come to see that moment in which my aunt made room in her kitchen and served Drake on paper plates as actually this kind of moment of connection, fragile, vulnerable, but actually an attempt at connection. I find this story incredibly important to remember for me and maybe to tell to you because we're living in a time in which people have known that in times of pandemic, actually, compassion tends to drop.

David Brooks wrote an important essay earlier this week in The New York Times in which he reviewed several historical studies of pandemics, and what he has found through reading these stories is that actually what happens in pandemics is actually compassion starts to ebb away because people become so fearful about what they have in their own homes and their own bodily integrity. And it becomes easy to stigmatize people, it becomes easy to blame people, and it becomes easy to focus only on our individual good and not on the good of others, not on the common good, not on the things that connect us to one another. Not on the things that truly make us human.

And I share all of this to you today because being part of this service and worshipping God and having a prayer life and centering on His word and connecting to one another and finding ways for us to be the church, not only by pulling people in, but actually walking forward and meeting people where they are and somehow actually creating community and serving others in this time of pandemic. Well, that's really important. Even if we do small half steps, even if we fail in little ways, even if we don't get everything we hope to do, we start to build and resist that natural drive to let the compassion kind of slowly drain out of our lives.

Now, all of this is really important, I think, for understanding what it means for this gospel from the Gospel of John to be real in our lives, because there was exactly the same kind of exchange between someone who was stigmatized and shamed and Jesus. The Samaritan woman who came in the middle of the day because, of course, she wouldn't feel comfortable actually getting her water at the beginning and the end of the day. She was someone who was suffering from incredible stigma and shame, in part because of her own life journey and the decisions that she made, whether they were in the best of her interest or maybe even without her fully being able to have agency, the five husbands she had. In part perhaps because she was a Samaritan and was although living in a Samaritan context, there were probably many different shades of people who were in and people who were out.

And she came in the middle of the day and encountered Jesus. They had a conversation by a well. And Jesus was sitting at the side of that well, tired and thirsty. They had a meeting. They connected to one another. And this conversation was like the conversation between my Aunt Corky and Drake. It had its awkward moments. They were not speaking the same language half the time. You can see this in the text.

The Samaritan woman thinks Jesus is talking about physical water when he's talking metaphorically and spiritually about spiritual water. This Samaritan woman has a completely different spiritual geography. She's thinking about the holy places in Israel rather than the holy places in Jerusalem. Jesus completely owns the fact that He is Jewish and that He does not understand things as a Samaritan does, even though the two had been mixed together for centuries.

This is an awkward conversation in which there is as much points of common disagreement as common agreement. And yet there is a connection. And yet there is somehow a meeting between the two. And something incredibly special happens in that meeting.

Now, many of you have your favorite passage from the Bible that says to you, what is the essence of Christianity? For some of you, maybe if you watched football in the '80s, you remember that the essence of Christianity had been summarized by the sign that used to be held over our head.

This one fan would have this sign holding over his head at a football game in which you would read John 3:16, which says, for God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten son. And that certainly is true, and that certainly is the gospel in miniature for many people. Martin Luther thought so.

Or maybe some of you think that our reading from the Epistle to the Romans is another kind of moment in which we see the gospel crystallized when we read that God proves His love for us and that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And that's a gospel in miniature, too. That's a message of salvation. It's a message of love. It's a message that reminds us that we cannot make our way up to God. God has made God's way to us through Jesus Christ.

But if you are going to ask me what is the essence of the gospel, I would say it's this exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. And I would say it for at least four reasons. It's a moment in which there is a meeting between Jesus and a woman. And this is a meeting of incredible intimacy. There's a moment in which actually the woman hears something Jesus says that he has said at no point until this point in the gospel of John.

Throughout this time in John, Jesus has been the subject of incredible epiphanies. He's been called the Son of God, the Lamb of God by John the Baptist. He's had disciples follow Him and have tried to stay with Him. He's had moments in which He has turned water into wine. But it's only in this gospel that when the Samaritan woman says to Him and mentions that she is waiting for Messiah that Jesus says I am He.

Previous to this time in the second chapter of John verse 24, it's written that Jesus did not yet entrust himself to anyone. For He knew the hearts of all men. But in this gospel passage, Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, I am He, I am the Messiah. Jesus actually in some ways repeats that incredible word from the Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew word that says Yahweh. I am He, I am who I am. I am the great I am. I am He.

And there was incredible vulnerability in that moment. And that vulnerability created the opportunity for intimacy and that intimacy between the woman and Jesus was transformative. Because in that moment of intimacy, Jesus became all that she hoped He would be. And in that same moment of intimacy, the woman finds herself transformed.

She is not someone who is ashamed. She's not someone who is stigmatized. She's not someone who is feeling excluded or marginalized because of who she is. She became a missionary. She became a witness and she immediately left her water jar and ran into the town and delivered the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, to the people of that city.

So the first thing that we have to notice in this gospel today is that the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel begins in intimacy and it moves to mission. It begins by that moment in which we are transformed by grace. And then it moves into a time in which we go out and share and bear witness to the difference that God is in us and through us.

The second thing I want you to note in this passage that I think is incredibly important, that goes to the core of what it means to be a Christian is that to be a Christian is to move from stigma and shame to liberation and life. The woman when she meets Jesus is incredibly shamed by her past. She's hiding it, she's hiding herself. And yet Jesus finds a way to pull her out of herself by not shaming her, but by telling her a truth that is liberating.

You know, there is a saying that the only way out of shame is through shame. The only way we get better from the shame that imprisons us is to talk about it. And this is difficult. This is something we're reluctant to do because when we talk about the things that exclude us, that talk about the things that make us feel less than and we talk about the things that make us feel like we are bad people, the things that imprison us from being all that God has called us to be. These things are hard to talk about. And yet talking about them is key. And Jesus somehow is able to tell a truth about that woman, that Samaritan woman that liberates her because he comes in and takes that story and moves her through shame to acceptance and life and love.

The third thing that I want you to see in this incredible awkward but beautiful exchange between the Samaritan woman and Jesus is that suddenly every place becomes holy. There is this argument about geography early on in the passage, which is kind of hard to totally figure out because they're arguing over where is the holy place in the Holy Land. Is it somewhere in Israel or is it in Jerusalem?

And this was an argument that had incredible relevance for anybody who was experiencing themselves as Samaritans or Jews. But Jesus actually speaks a universal word and He says

that every place is holy, that the worshipers of God are not going to be known about the territory they inhabit but by the spirit and truth they tell.

And a couple of weeks ago, Pastor Manisha gave an incredible sermon in which she lifted up for us the fact that none of us and no place is holy in this world because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So every place is holy. Every place is a place of transformation. Every place is a place of worship. Every experience you have is a place that can be redeemed. Every sin you have suffered from, there is a grace involved in it. And that is part of what it means to be a Christian. That is part of what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

And the final thing that I see in this passage, that's incredibly important for us, I believe, which is the crux of the gospel, is that there is water for thirsty souls. This is an incredible passage of scripture because in so many ways this is the kind of frame for the first part of the Gospel of John. And it images the last part of the Gospel of John where Jesus dies.

Jesus meets the woman at the well at 12 noon and Jesus dies at 12 noon. And Jesus is meeting the woman at a moment in which there is a revelation of himself as Messiah, and this is a moment of incredible vulnerability. And on Good Friday, on Calvary, when he's being crucified, this is a moment in which Jesus is revealed to be the Messiah. And in today's gospel, Jesus is experiencing profound thirst. And He's waiting by a well, hoping to find someone who would give Him a drop of water. And at the end of the gospel of John, only in John, does Jesus say as He's dying on the cross, I thirst.

So running through this passage that we're talking about today, there is a promise to us of what it means to find in Jesus not only a thirsty Lord, but a Lord who gives us living water. And the living water, in some ways, that Jesus is speaking about when he's speaking with a woman becomes incredibly open and pours out of Him through the blood He sheds on the cross. And that living water that is shed on the cross, it starts to come to us as life when we start to experience the resurrection of being born anew in the spirit.

So this woman receives living water because even though she had a bucket and could get physical water, she was dying of spiritual thirst. And Jesus has come not only to give us the living water of the spirit, but to see ourselves in some way as transformed by living in a world in which we become not only the recipients of living water, but we become fountains of living water to other people when the spirit of Christ moves through us.

And part of what it means to become fountains of living water is we start to care about who is thirsty. Because part of the ways in which the spirit of God transforms the way we look at our world is we start to see Jesus everywhere, and particularly in those who are thirsty or hungry. Now, of course, water is key in the Bible, I won't go through all the instances where you find it, but you see an image of today's gospel when you read in the Gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Mark that anyone who gives a cool cup of water to those who are thirsty has not lost their reward.

So the last part that we have to keep in mind is that Jesus has called us to not only share living water, but also to listen to those who are thirsty for physical water as well. And this is

why we have in the collect we read for today the prayer at the beginning of this service that we ask God to help us and keep us outwardly in our bodies and inwardly on our souls. Because when we are in right relationship with God, we are caring not only for the inside of people, but also their outsides. We want to see not only their souls transformed, but their bodies.

And so in this time of pandemic, one of the lessons we can learn is not to let the compassion drain out from us. But we live in a time in which we can actually begin to understand what is truly precious for us, because in those moments in which we pull in and take care of ourselves when we become fearful of our own bodily integrity, when we want just to keep our families safe, we begin to have an inkling into what it must be like to not have those gifts. And God can redeem those things as well. Those feelings that we have, that self-protection we have, we can begin to imagine what God might be doing through us and God might be calling to us to do so that other people have that protection as well.

And of course, finally, there is no way we can speak about water in this context of pandemic. And in this context of Detroit and not be aware of those who are physically thirsty. And so perhaps one way we can think about today's gospel is that we are called by this God we follow and Jesus Christ, by His first witness, the Samaritan woman, to bring food and water to others who are hungry and thirsty.

I'm grateful to the governor for her relaxing the water shutoffs that she's been doing for thousands of residents in the city of Detroit, because having access to clean water during a pandemic, well, that's the difference, I think, between life and death in a literal way. And I'm grateful for that compassion on the part of the governor. And I'm proud of the city that has provided that new service to people that it had shut off access to before because they could not afford it. This pandemic can be a teacher to us because that water should never have been shut off. And we can make a difference by the grace of God and Jesus Christ.

So as we take this walk and journey together in Lent, as we try to close the physical distance between us because of this pandemic, as we try to kind of create community with one another, let today's gospel be the guide to us. Let this Lent be a time and an invitation into greater intimacy with God. A time in which we come to know Jesus better. Let it be a time in which we give some room in our lives to read the Word of God like we'd never had before. Let it also be a time in which we start to talk through the things that stigmatize us and shame us so that we can know the life and love and liberation of Christ even better.

And so maybe reach out, even though we are physically separated, to someone who needs to maybe be a willing ear for you and maybe you can be a willing ear to someone and that way we can continue to be the church. And try to realize that no matter where you are staying, no matter whether you're at home and can't come near here, or that you're going to try to limit everything you can to stay away from here and try to stay away from large gatherings as we have been asked to do. Maybe in the midst of this dispersal that we find ourselves in, maybe this is an opportunity for us to realize that every place is holy.

And finally, as we think through the thirst that people are actually feeling in this world. Thirst that is physical as well as thirst that is spiritual, that we can take time to drink of God's grace.

Amen.

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