

aLent 3~ March 27, 2011 ~ A homily preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at Old St. Andrew's Church, Bloomfield, CT

Exodus 17.1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-42

The Samaritan woman's story is the Jesus story! Although I don't much like the Fourth Gospel as a portrayal of the historical Jesus, the theology it espouses clearly demonstrates to those in John's community what Jesus was all about.

In this day and age—so far removed from the tastes and smells of Jesus' time, his culture, the social mores, political sensibilities, family, tribal, and religious ties—our perspective is not surprisingly viewed through our own experience, our own cultural, social, and political sensibilities. If we think or feel something, why wouldn't those people have had similar thoughts.

Wouldn't, for example, the ancients have said, "Enough of these elitists who think they are better than everybody else"? Or, wouldn't a landless peasant approach a merchant or craftsman and say, "Hey, our kids are the same age, how about bringing the wife and family over for dinner on Friday evening"? Well, no.

For example, I have friends from all sorts of backgrounds—Maine loggers and farmers to former military aviators to teachers, lawyers, and business executives to builders, plumbers, and electricians to black tie and ball gown socialites. Likewise, I spend time with people of various races, with gay, lesbians, and trans-gender folks, the handicapped, Jews, atheists, and Unitarians, the mentally ill, even Republicans. Wouldn't Palestinians from Jesus' day have had a wide network of connections and friends from the community? Well, no.

Let me also observe, that 40 years ago I had never thought of a iPhone, Mac or iPad, nor that a normal day on Wall Street would generate a billion trades, nor that we would be in two wars for almost 10 years. Sometimes I imagine sitting down with my Dad—he died in 1973—and saying something like, "Hey Dad, listen to this. The President of the United States is a black, Harvard trained lawyer from Chicago whose mother was white and father was from Kenya. And, let me tell you about the internet. You sit at a computer—it has a keyboard like a typewriter but also a screen like a TV—and can send email—that's like a letter or telegram—that travels at the speed of light to anywhere in the world." Dad would have looked at me like I had been smoking something.

My point is that Jesus and the people of his time were creatures of their own culture and society just like Dad was locked in his time and place and

we're locked in ours. So, to appreciate and understand fully why I say the Samaritan woman's story is the Jesus story calls for an understanding and appreciation of life in ancient Samaria and who the Samaritans were in relation to the Hebrew people. Without that insight, the Samaritan woman is just a character in another nice Jesus story instead of the blockbuster Oscar winner of the 1st century.

The social strata of the ancient world was extremely well defined. It was much more complex than just the "haves" and the "have not's". The ruling elite were mostly impervious to the masses. They lived in their own world and did not relate to peasants...or anyone else. Likewise, the religious elite were set apart from those less ardent in their worship and commitment to a religious life. And so on—merchants, artisans, shopkeepers, shepherds, farmers, tax collectors, tradesmen, women, the widowed, prostitutes, children, etc. all fit in their own particular niche of the social order.

By definition, then, these groups were not homogeneous. Although they all lived in the same place—Capernaum, let's say—for the most part they didn't mix. Each group stayed with its own "kind," so to speak. Moreover, within the social structure there was a hierarchy. Someone who owned land was certainly of a higher value in society than a landless peasant.

Jesus' great insight was that the hierarchy used to value human beings was simply and completely wrong. He taught and, more importantly, demonstrated consistently by his actions that all people are of equal value as created beings...no matter what! This revelation is like Newton's understanding of gravity, Galileo saying the earth revolves around the Sun, Einstein's theory of relativity, or that Mac computers are...*never mind*.

History does not record anybody ever making this point with such passion and commitment before—that every person should be treated with respect and value. "Love God and your neighbor," is what Jesus says. The radical nature of Jesus' program—aptly named the *Good News*—cannot be overstated. Just imagine a person born into a class of people considered worthless and hearing, "You're not worthless at all but a child of God on an equal with everybody else, even the emperor and the chief priest!" Quite extraordinary and liberating then...and now.

Among those most deeply affected by Jesus' insistence on equality, respect, and value were women and children. The Jesus story is filled with examples of Jesus honoring women and children. So it is with the Samaritan woman. Right off the bat, he speaks to her—actually talks with her—not something even remotely socially acceptable. And, there's more.

Samaritans were considered by the Hebrew people—Jesus' people—to be particularly unworthy because centuries earlier their religious history veered off from that of Judaism. They became “unclean.” Among the Hebrews, disgust for Samaritans was a given. So, here in John's Gospel, Jesus is talking with a woman...who is a Samaritan—a double no-no.

Who is welcome in the kingdom of God? Everybody! Absolutely everybody. Jesus, according to the theology of John and his community, insists that even the most outcast among us is present to the Christ—“*I know that Messiah is coming,*” the Samaritan woman says. OMG!

You know the cell phone texting abbreviation OMG? It means, *Oh My God*. The import of Jesus opening his arms to this Samaritan woman—not a good start—and seeing her for who she is—a woman who has had five husbands and most recently a live-in—is stunning. This Jesus is a man who proclaims by what he does that you cannot be excluded from the kingdom of God, even if you're a Samaritan woman of questionable repute.

John goes on into his usual theological imagery, which is fine. He's teaching that Jesus represents spirit and truth, that he is the revelation of the face of our Creator God, that he teaches us who it is we can and should be as citizens of the realm, that salvation—remember that means *health*—comes when we know the bread of life is being the spirit of Christ among us.

Amen.