

Lent 3 (A)
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Texts: John 4:5-42

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When Melinda and I first met, we met just as colleagues. We were both pastors in the ELCA. Over a matter of months, we became friends, and gradually something more. And then one afternoon we took a walk together and surprised ourselves by deciding to get married. Over the course of about two years, our relationship had grown and deepened. And now, after nearly 29 years of marriage, here we are—and I couldn't be more thankful for a partner to share this journey with.

Our Gospel reading this morning shows us a relationship growing and deepening. It's not a romantic relationship, but it is a relationship of trust and commitment. It's a relationship of following Jesus as a disciple. And instead of developing over years, John shows it happening over the course of an afternoon. A woman from the Samaritan village of Sychar encounters Jesus, and it ends up that her life will never be the same.

I wonder whether this story can help us reflect on our relationship with Jesus, no matter how many years it's been growing. When we meet Jesus, it isn't like it was for the Samaritan woman at the well, speaking to him face-to-face. But at the same time, we don't encounter Jesus just as a figure of the past. Instead, we encounter the Spirit of Jesus as a living presence now. Our encounter with Jesus comes to us through scripture and through the sacraments and through this community. These are some of the ways we experience the Spirit of Jesus as living water to refresh our hearts and change our lives.

Our story begins with Jesus asking the Samaritan woman for a drink, and it might not be immediately obvious to us how Jesus shredded all sorts of social conventions and boundaries. Even though the people of Samaria and Judea could all trace their heritage back to Abraham and Sarah, even though they all looked to the Torah as God's Word, and even though they shared a history of being one nation under King David and King Solomon, the animosity between them ran deep. Most Jews travelling between Jerusalem and Galilee would take a long detour just to avoid setting foot in Samaria. They acted as though everything about the land and the people was "unclean." But Jesus chose to go to Samaria. He wanted to build relationships with people others hated.

On top of that, for Jesus, as a man, to speak to a woman who was not part of his family represented another huge boundary violation. It's no wonder, then, that the Samaritan woman was simply shocked that Jesus would ask her for a drink. Something like that just wasn't done! But Jesus responded in a way that invited her into a conversation, suggesting that he had something valuable to share with her. He wasn't just asking for a drink of water. He was engaging her as real person, someone worth knowing, someone with agency. Jesus was transgressing all the social rules that defined how people like them should interact.

That was the first step in the relationship. The Samaritan woman was interested in what Jesus had to say because he saw her as a person with value, someone whose life mattered. She said,

“Yes, give me this water.” I wonder if something like that is part of how you’ve encountered Jesus. Pretty much everywhere else in life, the messages we get are about how we don’t matter, because we’re too old, or not old enough, we’re not pretty enough or rich enough or popular enough. Or maybe we’ve been told we do matter—just as long as you keep bringing in those A+s at school, or as long as you keep bringing in that paycheck, or as long as you don’t do something stupid. But it’s not like that with Jesus. In baptism, the message we hear is, “You are loved. You are forgiven and made clean, and it’s all a gift.” Jesus disregards all our signifiers of worthiness, whether it’s our GPA or our good looks or our bank account. Jesus also disregards any kind of failure that we might imagine disqualifies us, maybe a divorce or a bankruptcy or an addiction. None of that matters to Jesus, because Jesus sees us and recognizes us as beloved children of God, and it’s all by grace. I wonder if realizing how deeply you are loved and valued has been an important part of your spiritual life, and part of how your relationship with Jesus has grown.

The next movement in this growing relationship is a little surprising. Jesus tells the woman to go, call her husband, and she replies that she has no husband. Jesus affirms the truth of what she’s said, but adds details she left out—that she’s had 5 husbands, and the one she’s with now is not her husband. I think it’s essential that we don’t hear any judgment in Jesus’ words. In that culture, a woman couldn’t divorce her husband, so this woman either experienced the deaths of five husbands, or, if she was unable to have children, maybe they left her. Either way, Jesus is telling her that he not only sees her as a real person, but also appreciates the pain and difficulty she’s been through. Her life matters, even though she probably wasn’t treated that way by most people, and her unique history matters. Jesus truly sees her in a way that other people don’t. This is what leads her to see Jesus as more than just an ordinary person. He must be a prophet.

I wonder if this movement in the story is similar to your encounter with Jesus, as the One who truly knows you and looks with compassion on the wounds you’ve experienced in life. Maybe you’ve felt that during prayer, or in receiving Holy Communion—that Jesus knows all about your struggles, and meets you in them. An important part of the spiritual life is being known and being accepted, wounds and all. And with Jesus, there’s even more. Jesus also shares our pain, in fact, the world’s pain. The cross reveals how God does not stand at a distance from the messiness of life. The Mystery behind all creation is very close to our struggles, our grief, our fear, and stands with us to be our strength. I wonder when you’ve found strength from knowing that God is with you through all the difficult times.

Finally, this encounter with Jesus moves deeper still into questions about God and worship, which are also questions about connection and meaning. Jesus answers the woman’s questions about the proper place for worship in ways that stretch way beyond the outer forms of worship drawing her, and inviting us as readers, to recognize worship as connecting to God with our heart, our innermost self. God desires people to worship in spirit and truth. Worship isn’t an activity done a particular way in a particular building. Worship is being connected to Jesus, who embodies the love of God, so that connection ends up shaping everything about the kind of life we live.

I wonder how you've experienced something like this piece of the story, if you've felt that gathering like this to sing and pray is just one small part of the overall movement in our lives of Christ's Spirit and presence to draw us into something beautiful and holy, something bigger and more mysterious than we can imagine. Our encounter with Jesus is really all about changing our lives so that we are rooted and centered in love, so that how we see ourselves and our neighbors is shaped by Jesus' vision for the human family made whole by the power of love. When we go home, when we go to work, when we visit with friends or family, when we are active in our neighborhood, it's all connected to what happens here—the living water that is Christ's renewing and healing presence is refreshing and restoring our lives, and then flowing through us for the sake of the world.

Our gospel writer tells us a story of transformation and new life that all happens in an afternoon at a village well. I imagine that most of us experience this transformation as a life-long movement of Christ's Spirit in our lives, as Christ draws us into his love, and renews and strengthens us with his love, and then, much like the Samaritan woman, Christ sends us to all of our relationships to be signs of his love. Thanks be to God. Amen.