

Lent 3 Year A
March 23, 2014

One of the real joys of my life right now is that I get to spend a good deal of time in two very different environments on a regular basis. Living down in Altadena, in what might be called “metro Los Angeles” and working here at All Saints, in what might be called “metro - well, probably not metro anything”, provides a wonderful contrast. To someone who lives outside of California, and doesn’t understand the rich variety of life experiences here in the Golden State, they might think that Altadena and Montecito are pretty much interchangeable. After all, both are relatively small communities adjacent to larger cities – Montecito, with its 9,000 citizens, borders Santa Barbara with its 90,000 residents; and Altadena, with about 40,000 souls, adjoins Pasadena, with a population of 140,000.

But as you might imagine, there are also some stark contrasts between the two communities. Montecito has just about twice the average per capita income of Altadena. Home values here far outpace Altadena’s. And rent is just about double what one would pay down there. The demographics of the two communities are also markedly different. In Altadena, 40% of the population is White, 30% is Latino, and 23% is Black. Meanwhile, here in Montecito, just under 90% of the population is White, only 6% is Latino, and under 1% is Black. It is just less than 100 miles from the front door of the church to the front door of my house, and yet, in many ways, these two communities stand worlds apart from one another.

That “two-world experience” lies, as well, at the heart of this morning’s gospel lesson. I know it was a l-o-n-g lesson today, which is part of the reason that Michelle and Vicki and I broke it up as we did. But even so, by the time we got finished hearing that story, it may have been hard to remember where it all began. So, let me refresh your memory: “Jesus came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.” Now the city of Sychar was only about 30 miles from the holy city of Jerusalem... less than 1/3rd the distance between here and Altadena. But – like Montecito and Altadena – those two cities were much farther apart than the distance might have indicated.

Sychar was a Samaritan city... that is, a city in the hill country region of Palestine known as Samaria. And in a battle which had gone on for 500 years before Jesus even showed up on the scene, the Samaritans and the Jews had been at odds with one another. The two groups had some significant differences in how they practiced their faith – despite the fact that both emerged from a common root – and it got so bad that the Jews considered the Samaritans to be lower in social standing even than the Gentiles (and that was pretty low). And frankly, the Samaritans thought about as much of the Jews in return. It was a sort of ancient version of the feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys – or, if you’re a Shakespeare fan, between the Montagues and the Capulets, with Romeo and Juliet falling victim to the family feud. In fact, the animosity between the two groups was so bad that the Jews would deliberately take long detours around the Samaritan territory as they traveled about Palestine, rather than take a direct route between the north and the south, which would have put them in contact with their arch-enemies.

I think it's important to understand this long-standing deep-seated hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, because it informs several of the foundational stories of Jesus' ministry. In the 10th chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus exhibits his own Jewish bias as he sends out his disciples with this admonition: *"Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."* And in the 9th chapter of Luke's gospel, this tension flares up again as we hear: *"As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went to a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem."* And certainly one of the most striking examples of the disregard the two groups held for one another comes into focus in one of Jesus' most beloved parables. In the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus uses the example of his sworn enemy to be the hero of the story, helping the victim of a highway robbery, even when the supposed "good guys" in the story – the priest and the Levite – pass the poor guy by as he lies at the side of the road.

And then, of course, there is today's encounter with the Samaritan woman who had come to draw water from the well. It appears to be just a chance encounter. After a long day on the road, Jesus is hot and tired and thirsty. And so, he sits by a well at the edge of a village to rest. But something is odd here. Why, do you think, is Jesus traveling through Samaria? We are never told. It simply adds a level of intrigue to the story. All we know is that the disciples have gone off to town to look for something for dinner, and Jesus finds himself alone.

But wait. He's not alone after all. For a local woman – a Samaritan woman – has come with her water jug resting atop her head to draw water from the well. Jesus looks at her... he looks at her water jug... and he looks at the well. Apparently, he has no choice. The well is deep, and he has no bucket himself. So the time has come to act. Jesus... speaks. "Give me a drink."

This is no ordinary person to whom Jesus speaks. She is, after all, a Samaritan. And she is, most certainly, a woman. And, as we shall soon learn in the story, she is a woman "with a past." And all of three of those factors should conspire to create a situation where neither Jesus nor the woman would want to be caught dead speaking to each other... especially in such a public space as the communal well where God-knows-who might walk by and see them interacting with one another.

And yet, Jesus knew perfectly well what he was doing. By operating outside the cultural norm of his day... by breaking the social taboos which had held society both together and apart for so long... by creating a new and different framework for social interaction, Jesus gave both the woman, and us, a model for how the world might change. And so, the question begs to be asked: "If Jesus were so willing to break social taboos 2000 years ago, what taboos would he be willing to break today?"

I have had the good fortune to live my life in several very different parts of the country. For the first 35 years of my life I lived among the rugged landscape, and even more rugged people, of Montana. And then I spent 9 years living in a town of 50,000 people in southeast Idaho where fully half of the population of that community was made up of Mormons. And now, for the past 13 years I have lived in this wonderful, culturally-diverse, anything-goes world of California.

In each of those various parts of the country, the social standards were very different from one another. So, I can only imagine that if Jesus were to be about the work of breaking social taboos, it would mean, for instance, that in Montana, if he wanted to shake things up, he go to a gay bar and have a drink; and in Idaho, if he wanted to shake things up, he'd go into any bar and have a drink; and here in California, if he wanted to shake things up, he would simply choose not to drink at all.

And so, when Jesus encounters this Samaritan woman at the well, the most amazing part of the violation of the cultural taboo is that it opened up a conversation, which, as the word “conversation” implies, led to the opportunity for conversion – conversion for both of them. For, following upon Jesus’ request for a drink of water, he also made an offer to the woman... an offer of another kind of water... a form of “living water” which would sustain her for all eternity. The interesting part of the dialogue between these two characters, at least to me, is not the sort of strange pronouncements Jesus made throughout the text. The compelling element of the story was that, every time Jesus spoke to the woman, she was ready with an immediate reply.

This very act of determination, of courage, of conviction, of sheer chutzpah, shows us a way forward in our own prayer and faith life with Jesus. It's easy, I think, to become intimidated by God, to believe that God is too big, or too busy, or too far off, or too important to waste time chatting with us. And so we approach God much as the visitors who'd traveled the Yellow Brick Road first approached the great Oz – bumbling, stumbling, with their hats in their hands, and lead in their shoes, and marbles in their mouths... unable to speak, unable even to look up. But the Samaritan woman would have none of that. Hers was an “in your face” kind of relationship with Jesus, and her invitation is that ours should be an “in your face” relationship with Jesus as well.

It was that willingness to be in dialogue which brought about the real twist in this morning's gospel. Both Jesus and the Samaritan woman had something which the other one needed. Each was to the other the source of life, the source of sustenance, the source of refreshment. Have you ever thought, in your own relationship with Jesus, that perhaps he needs as much from you as you do from him? How would that awareness change your prayer life? How would it change the way that you look at the scriptures? How would it change your understanding of what God intends for us in our lives? There's an old saying that goes something like this:

Without God, we cannot.

Without us, God will not.

The message of today's gospel is that, just as he did 2000 years ago, when Jesus had to cross the line between Israel and Samaria... when he had to cross the line of social custom... when he had to cross the line of people's expectations for him and his ministry... just as he did so long ago, Jesus keeps crossing that line today, and invites us to keep crossing that line alongside him.

The work of bringing about the transformation of all creation is not God's work alone. Every time we have a baptism here at All Saints, we shower the person being baptized with the waters of new life, and then we – the whole congregation – say to that newly baptized person: “Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and **share with us** in his eternal priesthood.” That was the work which Jesus invited the Samaritan woman at the well to do. And that's the work which Jesus continues to invite us to do as well. And it always... and in all ways... begins with water. Jesus said then, and Jesus says today, “Give me something to drink.”

Amen.