

Sermon: March 15, 2020 (Lent III) John 4: 5-42
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore – Rev. Greg Wooley

A week after our final grade 12 exams, my best friend and I took a trip from Regina to the big city of Vancouver. We were sent with very specific instructions on how to explore the east end of downtown on foot. Along the south part of this zone is lively Chinatown, at the north edge is gentrified, touristy Gastown, but in order to walk from one to the other you had to go through about 3 blocks that were pretty sketchy. Our instructions, when crossing from point a to point b, were to keep our heads down and get through as quickly as possible. My friend and I did what we were told, and managed to avoid the indescribable dangers in between the sights, sounds and scents of Chinatown and fun, quirky, historic Gastown.

Seven years later, Shannon and I moved to Vancouver to attend seminary, and our take on things as a young couple was quite different than the “safety first” approach encouraged for me as a sheltered teenager. Not only did we freely traverse through that same economically depressed “Downtown Eastside” area between Gastown and Chinatown; the Church we attended, First United, was right in the middle of that community. It took some getting used to Sunday services at which some of our fellow worshippers had slept in the underground car-park the night before, but the warnings I had heard about this area as a 17 year old were replaced by an awareness that people are just people – nobody’s life was “more valuable” than anyone else’s. Yes, there were risks inherent in this community, especially in the days before safe injection sites, but when we walked as fellow travellers on the road, and children of one God, the depth of community of the Downtown Eastside became evident, and the scary nature that had been portrayed, faded away.

Back in Jesus’ time and place, Jews travelling between Galilee and Jerusalem were given similar guidance to what my buddy and I were given in grade twelve: whatever you do, don’t go through Samaria if you can at all avoid it. This, however, wasn’t just a matter of going a few blocks this way or that way. If you wanted to avoid Samaria - and by extension, avoid the Samaritans – you went ALL the way around.

Biblical Scholar Peter Walker (pp. 82-85) describes it as follows:

“Galileans, if travelling to Jerusalem, would tend to bypass this whole area on their way southward, going instead down the Jordan Valley and then making their way up to Jerusalem from Jericho. It added about another 40 km to the journey, but it was worth it, if only to avoid the hazards of passing through Samaria.”

“This animosity went back [seven centuries, to when the Israelites] were deported and the area of Samaria was largely repopulated by foreigners. One hundred and fifty years later Judah suffered a parallel fate under the Babylonians; but when the Jewish exiles returned to rebuild Jerusalem, they experienced significant opposition from the Samaritans. To the Jews this may have felt like treachery from supposed cousins. From then on they saw the Samaritans as consisting largely of foreigners and viewed their religion as compromised and impure. Meanwhile the Samaritans themselves claimed to follow a purer form of Judaism, focused exclusively on the first five books of Moses.... It was into this irreconcilable ‘stand-off’ that Jesus came.”

So, how did Jesus handle this? Well, on his way back home to Galilee from his first trip to Jerusalem and Judaea, Jesus ignored the wisdom of the day, went right through the middle of Samaritan territory, and had a most marvellous encounter with a local woman. Whether this story is mostly historical or lovingly crafted by the gospel writer to make a point, it strives to tell us something about the character of Jesus – and by extension, the nature of God. In Christ Jesus, the societal divisions between “us” and “them”, and the dire warnings of what might happen if “we” engaged “them” in conversation or even worse, in relationship, count for nothing.

One of the main agendas that God worked through Christ, was to put the lie to any and all notions of a superior "we" vs. an inferior "they". In the realm of God, everyone belongs.

Jesus took the attitudes of his day – that Jews and Samaritans don't, can't and shouldn't mix – and did the opposite. And when he came to Jacob's well, not only did he talk to a Samaritan – strike one - he talked to a woman – strike two – and engaged this Samaritan female, in theological discourse – strike three, you're outta here! (now that all sports leagues have shut down due to Coronavirus, I have to get my sports imagery wherever I can find it!). This was no small affront to popular ways.

This modelling by Jesus, of how to handle the prejudices we grow up or the agreed-upon understandings of whom to avoid, works alongside his parable (Luke 10: 25-37) of a seriously injured traveller being saved, not by a respected priest or a Levite, but by a despised Samaritan. Jesus not only questions the prejudice, he completely inverts it, making the Samaritan the hero of the story; and in our gospel lesson today, a Samaritan woman, is his debate partner in making an important theological point about our spiritual sustenance. (In Eastern Catholic and Orthodox traditions, she even has a name! – St. Photini) Jesus makes a concerted effort to explode the prejudices of those who call themselves his followers, and then continuously challenges us to go one step wider, every time we figure our circles of friendship and care are wide enough.

That speaks to us this weekend, when Affirming Ministries across Canada had big plans to be Public, Intentional and Explicit in celebrating the lives of all people who are pushed to the margins, expressly including the LGBTQ2S community. Unfortunately, many congregations, here included, that had planned "PIE Days" needed to step back from having a fun day of sharing food and fun together due to COVID-19 protocols, but the message of this weekend remains. Many religious folk in Jesus' day believed in the ethnic inferiority of Samaritans and the superiority of men over women, and they did whatever necessary to make sure their children thought that way too. A goodly number of religious folk in our day have similarly made life quite miserable for LGBTQ2S persons, not only limiting the participation of sexual minorities in Church life, but making it sound like the will of God. The task of all Christ-followers, in earshot of that, is to walk right through the middle of it, just as Jesus did with his society's bluster about Samaritans, and Women, and any other smaller categories of "unworthies."

On this weekend, a mere three days after the World Health Organization finally declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic, we need to also listen to the murmurings around us, as more and more measures are enacted to enhance public safety. There has been, and will continue to be, background chatter about "those people" who brought this virus from other parts of the world, to here. Some of that is just the sound of fear, but racism is racism regardless of what else is at play. Be attentive for that talk, please. And let us not forget the issues of land, and broken relationships between First Nations and the Crown, and the racial tensions that were at the forefront of Canada's awareness not so many days ago. Those issues are far from resolved, and the more we can step into that uncomfortable territory of reconciliation and the hard but rewarding space of relationship- building, the more we are following Jesus into the Samaritan lands that his society said he should stay away from. We're 2,000 years and 10,000 km from where Jesus was, but the difficult places he calls us into are not all that different from the ones he walked into.

And there is at least one more way, that this story of Jesus engaging a Samaritan woman speaks to our context: and that is, the growing ideological divide in this province, and how difficult it is to engage in respectful dialogue. Aspects of this are so similar to the lack of civility that we hear constantly from the antagonistic two-party rhetoric south of the border. Somewhere, somehow, we need to recover the ability to converse with people whose worldview may be very different from our own, to stay in relationship with one another. That doesn't mean there won't be conflict – in fact, when strong views are honestly shared about the issues at

hand, we can guarantee that there will be conflict – but it won't be accompanied by name-calling, or labelling, or dismissiveness toward the opinions and personhood of those who feel differently. Jesus was told to avoid the Samaritans, but instead he initiated contact. Jesus was told to disregard the opinion of women, but instead he started the conversation.

We miss something about this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, if we imagine it was a pleasant conversation; no, there was edginess to the dialogue, testing each other's boundaries. But they stayed with it – remained in dialogue/debate rather than reverting to “when my friends warned me about you, I should have listened to them.” There were points that needed to be said, and points of view that may not have been swayed by the other person, but we don't see Jesus at the end of it raising his arms in triumph, saying “I sure showed her, huh?!” As much as this encounter in John proclaims Jesus Christ as living water, the one who bring us “into the flow” of God's renewing love, it's the actions that speak to us as much as the words: the actions of going to unexpected places, and having meaningful dialogue with those we are supposed to avoid and disrespect.

This story has so much to say to us today. Jesus wandered into uncomfortable territory:

- literally, by going through Samaria rather than skirting it;
- figuratively, by engaging a woman in conversation, even getting into personal details of her life;
- and for lack of a better word, provocatively, prodding and chiding and cajoling those of us who want to follow in his path of peace and love, to walk into our own uncomfortable places.

When we come to those places of discomfort, we are reminded to pay close attention, for times of discomfort give us a place to learn so much about ourselves and our neighbours and maybe even God.

These are truly uncomfortable days, as much of the world goes into Coronavirus lockdown. In some nations and regions, this is inconvenient-tinged-with-concern, as places with few documented cases take large steps to try to keep it that way; other places are immersed in tragedy, as families bury their loved ones, and many of them do so surrounded more by blame than compassion. At moments we are overwhelmed by alarm, at other moments we calmly seek accuracy and public safety and protection for the most vulnerable. In these changing, chaotic times, may we avoid division and divisiveness; and may our individual lives and our life as a community in Christ, whether gathered or dispersed, express his wisdom and inclusion, and his brave, compassionate, refreshing love. Amen.

Reference cited:

The United Church of Canada, “COVID-19”. <https://www.united-church.ca/news/covid-19-united-church-statement>

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