

"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO SUFFER"

John 4:5-42

March 12, 2023 Lent Three

York Center Church of the Brethren

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Jesus met a lot of suffering people. He often healed those who had a physical illness or disability. He cried with those who were grieving and offered friendship to those who were lonely. He shared wisdom with those who were confused. He welcomed those who were unwelcome by everyone else. He understood that suffering came in many shapes and sizes. He never turned away from suffering and he even experienced it himself. The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus showing compassion for suffering people. So, I have no idea how Christians today ever got the idea that they would never suffer if they follow Jesus. Using suffering as a way to measure your faith is ridiculous. Human beings will suffer- there is no escaping that truth.

What the Bible tells us is that we will suffer but we don't have to suffer alone. The living presence of Christ in our lives is embodied by our faith community, this congregation. If we can help it, no one will suffer alone. That's the beauty of this community. It is but one of the ways we live out our faith and follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

When someone in our midst is suffering, we pray for and with them, we bring food, we visit, we send a note or make a phone call. Sometimes we just sit and cry with someone in pain. We don't do it perfectly, but we do our best.

At first glance this story from the Gospel of John may not appear to be a story of suffering. We see Jesus and his disciples traveling, by foot, of course, from Judea in the south of Palestine to Israel in the north. The most direct route between the two- a three-day trip- was through Samaria. The thing that makes this story unusual is that Samaria was off limits to good Jews.

Even though Jews and Samaritans were cousins, members of the same family- descendants of Abraham and Sarah- conflicts had them at each other's throats for centuries. The Jews considered themselves the pure bloods, the true descendants and they saw the Samaritans as impure, of mixed blood. They didn't talk to each other, didn't travel through each other's territory, and they certainly didn't share food or drink.

Theologian Karoline Lewis tells us that in this story, "going through Samaria was a theological necessity, rather than a geographical one." Do you remember who Jesus met last week? Nicodemus, a good Jew, who just couldn't quite understand what Jesus was telling him. Jesus told him, "God so loved the **world**..." Traveling through Samaria is the

way Jesus is showing his disciples- and us- what he meant by "world." The world meant all of God's creation- even the land of their enemies.

So, Jesus stops at Jacob's well. Jacob was an important patriarch in the history of the Jews and the Samaritans. Jesus is showing that this is not a new story. It is a revelation of the God of their ancestors. All of this tormented history is hovering in the air as we find Jesus exhausted, hungry, and thirsty, resting by Jacob's well in the land of his enemy while his disciples went into town to buy food. And here comes, of all things, a woman.

A good Jew wouldn't talk to a Samaritan but even that would be better than talking to a woman. Rabbis did not acknowledge the presence of women in public and they certainly didn't talk to them. The longest recorded conversation in all of scripture between Jesus and another person takes place right here, beside the well in the desert heat at high noon with this woman. And what a scandalous conversation it is! She was bold in her questions and in her answers. She looked Jesus in the eye and engaged him in a profound theological discussion.

She is the very first person in the Gospel of John to whom Jesus reveals his true identity. She says, "I know the Messiah is coming." Jesus replies with the same words of identity God used with Moses at the burning bush, "I Am."

Barbara Brown Taylor describes this moment. *"It is the first time he has said that to another living soul. It is a moment of full disclosure, in which the outsider and the Messiah of God stand face to face with no pretense about who they are. Both stand fully lit at high noon for one bright moment in time while all the rules, taboos, and history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground."* (1)

Remember that Jesus is parched and he is totally dependent on this woman for a drink of cool, refreshing water. She has a bucket. He doesn't.

The reality of the woman's suffering becomes clear when Jesus tells her to "Go, call your husband and come back." She replies, *"I have no husband."* He says, *"You have had five husbands and the man you are living with now is not your husband."* Let's remember that in those days marriage was an economic necessity. That's why the Jews were always reminded to care for the widows. Woman alone couldn't survive on their own for very long in such a patriarchal society. In saying, "I have no husband," she is not only making a statement about her marital status but also about her status as a marginalized person.

It is no surprise that many of the male theologians I have read, blame this woman for her status, judging her and labeling her as immoral. But not Jesus, he doesn't call her sinful and ask for repentance he doesn't offer forgiveness, Obviously, she has no reason to

repent. She could easily have been widowed, abandoned, divorced, or deserted by any of those five husbands.

As a single woman with no husband to support her, she would have had no choice but to live with a family member or her husband's brother, which is commanded in scripture. Rather than imagining this woman's story as one of suffering and tragedy, generations of theologians and preachers have preferred to call her an immoral sinner.

When Jesus identifies her reality, she doesn't beg forgiveness, because she has done nothing wrong. She does call Jesus a prophet. In the New Testament prophecy is history. Prophets don't predict the future, they interpret the events of history through their own context and their relationship with God. Jesus told her about her life. He named the truth about her life. A truth that is heartbreaking and most likely the reason she finds herself alone at the well at noon, not a good time to be hauling water.

She identifies Jesus as a prophet and then proceeds to ask him a very thorny theological question at the heart of the discord between Samaritans and Jews- the proper place to worship God. Samaritans built their temple on Mt. Gerizim. The Jews built theirs on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The Temple equaled the presence of God, and of course, God couldn't be in two places at once, so each believed their temple was God's only address. By that time both temples had been destroyed by enemies. The woman is asking Jesus, "where is God?" And Jesus says, "right here in front of you."

This is a story about identity. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *"By telling the woman who she is, Jesus shows her who he is. By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens. The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is. He is the one who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises, speaking to you like someone you have known all your life, bubbling up in your life like a well that needs no dipper, so that you can go back to face the people you thought you could never face again, speaking to them boldly as he spoke to you."* (2)

What touches me most about this story is the way Jesus treats this unnamed woman- he treats her with dignity and respect. He doesn't make assumptions about who he thinks she is. He sees her as she truly is- a beloved child of God, his sister, a woman of worth and value, one of the reasons God sent him into the world. When he was thirsty she had all the power because she was the only one with a bucket. I wonder if she was the one he was thinking of when we read, "I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink," recorded in Matthew's Gospel.

When the disciples return from town with lunch, they are shocked and scandalized to see Jesus engaged in a conversation with a Samaritan woman. What is wrong with him? Does he

have heat stroke? Jesus doesn't acknowledge their reaction. The woman left her bucket at the well and ran into town. I wonder what else she left at the well?

Maybe she left behind her ostracism, disrespect, marginalization, loneliness, disgrace, suffering, and she takes with her a new identity; abundant life, hope, acceptance. She has been transformed and is now a witness to the Messiah of God.

We don't really know what the people in town thought of her. The fact that she went to the well by herself at the hottest part of the day makes me think she wasn't welcome to go with the other women in the early morning and evening. If she wasn't welcome, that didn't stop her from running back to town to tell everyone, "come and see!" She was eager to share the good news with everyone else. And they listened to her.

She didn't just tell the people who had been nice to her, she told everyone, probably even the ones who had a part in her suffering. She poured out her story like a gushing fountain of living water and they gulped it down, believing in Jesus because of her. They ran to the well to see for themselves. I wonder what the disciples thought when a crowd of enthusiastic Samaritans came running toward them?

The townspeople offered hospitality to Jesus, and he stayed with them for two days. By then the people believed in him because they themselves had formed a relationship with him. They no longer needed to hear about him second hand.

In verse 42 we read, *"It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."* This is the only time in the Gospel of John that we see the word, "Savior." And it is here- in enemy territory where the good news is shared by a woman. Glass ceilings were shattered that day. Border walls crumbled to pieces. Religious taboos shriveled up and died.

An outsider becomes an insider through a personal encounter with Jesus and she becomes a witness. We believe in Jesus is not because of what we know **about** him, but because we **know him**. This woman came to faith in stages, baby steps, one question at a time. And Jesus welcomed her skepticism and her questions.

He was a thirsty Messiah, and she was a resourceful woman. Together they brought good news to a whole city. From this moment on Jesus knew that his ministry would not be confined by social, ethnic, cultural, or religious boundaries.

All social conventions that dehumanize and oppress God's children would be broken beyond repair. And even now, no matter how hard we try to repair and rebuild the walls that separate us, they will not stand.

The woman at the well is our spiritual matriarch. She recognized the truth when she saw it.

She persisted and because she did her life was transformed.

She persisted and the life of her whole community was transformed.

She persisted and I believe, even the life of Jesus was changed. She helped him to bring to life the words he spoke to Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that God sent the only Son, and whoever believes in him will have abundant life."

Blessed are those who suffer for they shall be seen and known and loved by Jesus.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *"Identity Confirmation," Barbara Brown Taylor, THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY, February 28, 1996.*