

Everyone is a Somebody

Cooke's-Portsmouth

March 19, 2017

John 4:5-42

The gospel lesson for this morning introduces us to a woman who is the polar opposite to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, whom we revisited last week. He was an insider; a leader of the Jews. He had a name. He came to Jesus by cloak of night. The woman at the well is a social, political and religious outsider. She has no name and she is confronted by Jesus in the heat of the day. It would seem that even among her peers she is an outsider- going to the public well to draw water at a time when she would not run into other women attending to the same task.

They would have gone to the well to draw water sufficient for the day in the early hours of the dawn; before the sweltering, arid heat of the day had set in. I assume that this woman knew the embarrassment of gossip and ostracism. She would never be a part of the social scene that may have gathered daily around the well, as other Samaritan women interacted together around a domestic chore. Better for her to avoid the majority and go to the well when she was reasonably certain not to run into anyone. But despite her ostracism, namelessness and shunning, she was a woman of strength and character.

She knew who she was and who she was not; where she belonged and where she did not. Better to contend with the noontide heat rather than icy tongues of her fellow townswomen. She comes to the well and meets a tired and thirsty Jesus who is also alone; tired and parched. He makes the first move, initiating the conversation with a request, "Give me a drink."

Jesus' request is daring because by speaking to her he crosses significant boundaries of religion, ethnicity and gender. Men and women had very little interaction with one another, but he was also a Jew; and Jews and Samaritans had very little to do with one another. The woman at the well seems to know that Jesus is a Jew, but she has not heard him preach or seen him perform any miraculous deed of power. She is intrigued. This nameless woman is no shrinking violet. She wants to know who Jesus thinks he is to ask her for a drink of water. And the conversation that ensues is deeply theological

The separation between Samaritan and Jew goes back to antiquity when the northern Jews, who were not carried off into exile, permitted Alexander the Great to build for them a temple on Mount Gerizim. The returning exiles under the leadership of Ezra could not acknowledge any shrine except the one restored by them in Jerusalem. The separation between the two groups increased in the closing centuries before the birth of Christ. So in this text Jesus is demonstrating knowledge of the woman and her culture and beliefs.

He was aware that Samaritans consorted with enemies, engaged in false worship, and would have been cognizant of everything that Jews of Judah would have thought the kingdom of Israel in the north was guilty of. But it mattered not an iota to the Son of God, who saw the woman deserving of everything that he had come to offer the world. She may have been a nobody in the eyes of her fellow villagers because of the common law relationship with her partner, but nobody is a nobody in the eyes of Jesus. Even his disciples seem to view the woman with a similar disdain as the villagers.

Jesus' interaction with a woman shocked his disciples, and he may have lost some ground that day, but he has modeled how to deal with wounds and divisions. He even challenges social convention by asking the Samaritan woman for a drink of water. This is a text about

reconciliation. The time had come to close the gap between Jew and Samaritan; Jew and Gentile and sundry other lines of demarcation at the time that served to keep safe distance between lofty and lowly.

Everyone is a somebody in the eyes of God. No one is entirely outside of the realm of acceptance, grace and forgiveness. And the nameless, shunned woman seems to understand what escaped Nicodemus initially. The truth that Jesus has come to offer may be deeply theological and difficult to understand. Rather than debating the plausibility of his words, like Nicodemus, she accepts them. And then she became a witness- an evangelist- leaving behind her water pot and entering the city that has shunned her to share with others what she has glimpsed: Can it be the Messiah?

I love this twist in the story when a woman shunned becomes a useful vessel for the purpose of Jesus. One of lesser character may have kept the good news to herself. Why should she invite those who had treated her less than respectfully to come and see and share the experience? Why not keep it to herself; treating others as she had been treated? And this may just be the power of grace at work.

In recognizing her as a person of value and worth the shunned woman was empowered to find her courage and treat her fellow Samaritans as persons of worth; somebodies!

They took the word of a heretofore shunned and disrespected woman who had found her voice. She invited them to look past all petty disagreements social, political and religious and come and see for themselves. And they did, and they too came to believe in who was in their midst: messiah of God. Water that satisfies is not simply about addressing bodily thirst, but it is about putting the past, and its divisiveness behind.

Sometimes, when we have been treated badly by a person in the pew we want to retaliate. Or we do not allow the power of forgiveness to wash over us. We cling to old resentments, or we cling to the familiar because we are afraid of change. But the time to move beyond the confines of situation, fear and judgement is vast upon us. Like the woman at the well we too need to embrace the truth that it matters not what brought us to a place: what matters is where we go and what we do from here.

A woman shunned who was an embarrassment to herself and the community began to see herself with new eyes when awash in grace. Hers is a story of remarkable transformation. She begins as an outsider to both the emerging community of faith and the community in which she resided. She is made strong enough by the unconditional acceptance of Jesus to leave her water pot behind-the very reason that she had set out in the first place to fill- and runs boldly into the community that has marginalized her to invite any and all to come and see.

This is a text about so many Christian principles: inclusivity for there is a place for all in the kingdom; forgiveness; acceptance; empowerment, transformation and evangelism. Once we have been forgiven and can forgive ourselves our imperfections we too are transformed, empowered and given a voice. The woman at the well found her voice and was able to overcome her feelings of ostracism and unworthiness and wanted even those who may have shunned her and caused her grief to come and see and hear for themselves. And because she took the risk in overcoming her feelings of self-consciousness many of her neighbours experienced a similar transformation. Like a refreshing drink of water on a hot and sultry day.

Not long ago our Director of Music came into my office to talk about anthem selections throughout Holy Week. Early in the year he had outlined anthems to correspond with dates but was judging that many of the Lenten anthems were more suited to Holy Week with reference to

lament, agony and Gethsemane. We switched a few around and decided that since the texts for this morning were about thirst and water that the choir should sing an anthem about water. This is a text about living water.

Unlike other passages the woman does not approach Jesus with a request; Jesus begins the conversation with a request of the woman, "Give me a drink." The woman is surprised at the request for many reasons, but it is a conversation starter. The story ends with the townsfolk assuring the woman that it was not only because of her disclosure about Jesus but because of their experience that they had come to believe. It is a subtle reference but one discerns that the attitudes of others were changed towards the woman.

There is an element of gratitude and respect shown to her. They now speak to her. Acknowledge her. Have an element of respect for her as a person and follower. They too have been revived by living water that transforms attitudes and opens up the eyes of the spiritually blind. They too have come to realize that everyone is somebody in the eyes of God; that judgement of another belongs solely in the realm of the perfection of providence. It is our responsibility to be open; to risk seeing ourselves as God sees us: worthy of love, respect and deserving of all of the privilege that comes with being a member of a community.

As we continue to walk the Lenten walk, and long into the future of ensuing Lenten walks, I hope to remember the incredible harm that can be done by being judgemental. I hope that we will endeavor to look beyond the veneer of convention and outward appearance and risk looking deeper into the soul of another. I hope that we can emulate the example of Jesus who was not limited by social convention; who could see the worth in fishermen, tax collectors and marginalized women who were not living a full and rich life because of shame and embarrassment. I hope that we will remember that everybody is a somebody even if the life that

they live is far outside of our own experience and beyond our comfort zone. We may not be able to please all of the people all of the time but that should not impede us from trying. The woman at the well could have spurned the conversation with Jesus. She was used to turning away from judgemental eyes and disdainful looks and wagging tongues. But she did not. She engaged and was engaged by the conversation.

At the community dinner held a few weeks ago I had the experience of sitting down with folks that I do not normally talk with for longer than the time that it takes to offer them a bus ticket or a food voucher. And I am a better person for the opportunity. Opportunity abounds to give and receive the transformative power of living water. May God grace us with the courage to draw and drink deeply. Amen.