

The Third Sunday in Lent (Lent 3A) – March 23, 2014
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Reaching out and reaching across

A friend of mine worked for several summers back in the early 1970's as a counselor at a camp in Northern Ireland called Corrymeela – a Gaelic word meaning “Hill of Harmony.” This rural camp was an outgrowth of an urban ecumenical ministry based on the Shankhill Road in Belfast, the dividing line between Roman Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods, whose enmity has stretched back hundreds of years. Out at Corrymeela, kids from these Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods were brought to have a camp experience together—kids who had grown up in the violent sectarian context of a deeply divided society, and who had little other frame of reference than the hatreds and division from which they came. My friend told me a little story of the beginning of one of the camp sessions when a group of boys who had just arrived were huddled together talking with each other. A few minutes later they came up to their new counselor – my friend – and one of the boys asked him, “What are you?” My friend immediately knew what they were asking, and so he paused for a moment and said, “I’m a Jew.” The kids looked a little baffled, and they went back into their huddle. A minute later they came back to my friend, and a different boy with a concerned look asked him, “a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?” With that, my friend was able to reach out and across, begin a new conversation and new relationships, and help these kids find and build a bond of common humanity.

On this Third Sunday in Lent, we find some similar dynamics at work in our gospel reading, and the more we look the more we will see. The lengthy conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is an argument against literalism. For example, when Jesus speaks about water, he does not mean the wet stuff down in the well; rather, he is speaking of himself, as the Samaritan woman finally comes to suspect. Furthermore, all the dialogue about her various husbands are about something much broader than this woman's personal life. The depth of the conflict between Samaritans and Jews, combined with the ancient taboo against a rabbi speaking to a woman in public, make Jesus' openness and reaching across these divides all the more significant and scandalous. Some context is needed here so that we can understand a bit more of what's going on in this conversation at the well. The ancient and bitter conflict between Jews and Samaritans is brought out in this gospel. We hear, for example, in the ninth verse, “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans,” a statement which implies that Samaritans—although the northern cousins of the Jews—were considered by them as ritually and permanently unclean. The roots of their conflict reached back more than seven centuries earlier—back to when the Northern Kingdom of Israel and its capital Samaria were destroyed in 721 B.C.E. by the Assyrian empire. Many, but not most, of the Israelites were deported or exiled, and the Assyrians populated the region with other conquered peoples from five other nations who eventually married among the remaining Samaritans. Though those who remained in and around Samaria considered themselves true Israelites, the Judeans—or those

from the southern Kingdom of Judah—considered the Samaritan northerners to have impure blood and considered their religious practices tainted. Furthermore, when the Judean Jews returned from their forced exile after 539 B.C.E., the Samaritans opposed their attempts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple.ⁱ And later, their conflict escalated when the Samaritans initially cooperated with Greek emperor Alexander the Great's project of colonization known as Hellenization, and again in the second century B.C.E. when the Samaritans helped the Syrians in their campaigns against the Judean Jews. This came to a head in 128 B.C.E. when the Jewish high priest, who was also the Judean governor, John Hyrcanus, destroyed the Samaritan [sanctuary] temple.

Jews considered Samaritans “goy,” a term used of foreigners and Gentiles. Now, there were some notable differences religiously: for example Samaritans accepted only the Torah, or Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—as canonical Scripture, and they held Mt. Gerizim in Samaria as the divinely designated place for worship, as the Samaritan woman refers to “this mountain” in her conversation [John 4:20]. This centuries old conflict and these religious differences lie behind the conversation between Jesus and this woman at the well.

Unfortunately many preachers and biblical commentaries have treated the Samaritan woman herself as being a scandalous woman gone wrong as they interpret literally Jesus' comment, “you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.” But this dialogue is about the broader context, as Jim Douglass and others have pointed out.ⁱⁱ The Samaritan woman is in fact a spokesperson for her marginalized people of Samaria, and in that role she speaks eloquently as a national theologian on behalf of her people to this man Jesus whom she sees as representative of his Judean people. They address each other in the plural in this gospel. So she addresses Jesus as “you” meaning “you people;” for example, she says, “Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you [that is, you people] say that the place where people must worship is Jerusalem.” And Jesus replies, “The hour is coming when you [that is, you people] will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.”

So, in light of her more representative nature, and in light of their dialogue on nationalism and worship, just who might her (that is, her peoples') five former husbands be? Jesus is alluding not to her personal life here but to Samaria's past, in which, as I mentioned earlier, five nations were said to have colonized and intermarried with Samaritans who had remained in the former Kingdom of Israel after its conquest by the Assyrians in 721 BCE.ⁱⁱⁱ And “the one you have now [that] is not your husband,” is Rome, the imperial and colonial power with whom the Samaritans lived somewhat more intimately than with Judeans, but by whom they were still subjugated and did not intermarry as much as with the previous five. In fact, Jesus crosses over so many divides to be with this woman where she was with her issues, where her people were with their issues, that this Samaritan woman is identified as the first apostle to her people. Like the other apostles in the gospels who first left their nets and boats, their parents, and even a tax office, this Samaritan woman leaves her water jar at the well and runs off to share her encounter with Jesus with her townsfolk. I even suspect that to the author of this gospel story, the male disciples of Jesus, who were scandalized,

astonished to find him speaking with a woman, are an allusion to the early church and some of its male members' wonderment at various women disciples alongside them, with whom Jesus had spoken and invited into his mission. In this gospel of John, in fact not only this Samaritan woman, but also Martha, Mary, and Mary Magdalene, have extraordinary conversations with Jesus and subsequent substantial leading roles.

So, in the midst of a context of such national, ethnic, religious, and gender division in this gospel conversation, we see a Jesus who reaches out and reaches across all manner of division; and we see a gospel proclaimed by a Samaritan woman apostle! In reaching out and reaching across, Jesus acknowledges the dignity and integrity of this foreign woman and her marginalized people, empowering her and them in new ways. Once he has done this and has broken the taboos and scandalized even his own disciples, Jesus cannot and does not take back the healing, repair and restoration of these bonds of common humanity. If such divisions as these were declared outdated as far back as this 1st century gospel story, what has taken our churches and all other human institutions in our world so long to reach out and reach across these and many other divisions two millennia later? We have a long way to go. So whether we're Protestant or Catholic as those kids at Corrymeela, or whether we're Jewish or Samaritan as in our gospel story, or whether we are black or white, straight or gay; Jewish, Christian or Muslim—as William Sloane Coffin stated, “If what we think is right and wrong divides still further the human family, there must be something wrong with what we think is right...Claiming to be full of principles, [we can too easily run the risk of] proving to be full of prejudice instead.”^{iv} Our Episcopal Church (and the wider Anglican Communion) has long continued to widen horizons towards a spaciousness of Spirit. May we all no longer narrow ours.

Now finally, there is a further division in this story to which Jesus reaches out and reaches across; namely, the division within each of our own hearts and minds. Notice that as Jesus reaches across the Samaritan/Judean divide and the male/female divide he also reaches into the internal dividedness of the heart and mind of the Samaritan woman. The woman comes to a faith, albeit a divided one—you can hear it in her proclamation to her people: “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”—and yet her divided faith is enough to inspire others to seek and respond. Now that is pretty good news for all of us who doubt our ability to share our faith with others. But as God reaches out and into and across all manners of division in our hearts and in our world, all we have to do is point in the right direction—for action speaks louder than words. As we work together to build the bonds of our common humanity in the name of God here in this parish and city and beyond, those who see and hear may rediscover the living waters of God for themselves. Amen.

ⁱ Ezra 4

ⁱⁱ Jim Douglass, “The Samaritan Apostle” in Living the Word (Washington, D.C.: Sojourners, 1996), p. 18.

ⁱⁱⁱ as recorded in 2 Kings 17:24-34

^{iv} William Sloane Coffin, The Courage to Love (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 46.