March 15, 2020 • Third Sunday in Lent • Children’s Church

“Creating Bridges”
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 4:5-30, 39-42

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flock drank from it?” Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

This woman needed living water, the water of love. The Samaritan woman was out there alone at the hottest time of the day. She may have been ostracized. Her reputation was in tatters. She was dangerous to be in the desert all alone. The fact that this woman was not even a Jew but a despised Samaritan. Rather than occurring under cover of darkness, this exchange takes place in the glaring light of the burning noonday sun.

The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” They left the city and were on their way to him. Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, “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.”

We are gifted this morning with one of the most beautiful and transforming stories in the Bible. It’s the story of a woman with the water Jesus needs to save her from dying of thirst. And it’s the story of the water he has to save her from the living death of rejection and sin. The sharing of these waters brings reconciliation and healing.

Thank you, Dane, for reading us this long story. Do you know that this dialogue between Jesus and this woman is in fact the longest conversation anywhere in the whole Bible? Twice as long as Jesus’ exchange with Nicodemus. That’s how important the message of this story was to the writer of this gospel. In John’s Gospel, this woman is the first person to engage in a serious theological discussion with Jesus and the first to acknowledge him as the Christ. A woman. A Samaritan. Jesus talks with her. Jesus takes her seriously. Jesus drinks from her ritually unclean Samaritan bucket. How amazing is that?

In last week’s story, we remember, Nicodemus had come to Jesus at night to learn about being born of water and the Spirit. Today, we develop that theme further, but the situation could hardly be more different. Jesus and the woman at the well. Instead of being questioned by a leader of the Jews, a learned Pharisee, Jesus is here confronted by a marginal, unnamed woman of questionable character. Not only that, this woman was not even a Jew but a despised Samaritan. Rather than occurring under cover of darkness, this exchange takes place in the glaring light of the burning noonday sun.

Unlike Nicodemus who sought Jesus out, there is no apparent intentionality in today’s encounter: the two just seem to run into each other. There they are, out in the middle of the desert. There are no crowds around this time, this man. He could have died of thirst. He finds a well all right, but then has no cup or bucket with which to draw water and drink.

Again, it seems, God’s angels are out there in the wilderness ministering to him. There is someone at the well who can assist him—but it turns out to be just about the last person on earth Jesus might want to encounter there. It’s a woman, at a time when Jewish rabbis were not to engage women in conversation. Period. And not only that, but this is a divorced woman. A woman with a shady past some said.

That’s the only way to explain what she was doing out there that day all alone. Women usually went to the well in small groups in the cool of the morning. They went together, friends, neighbors, family. Then as now it was dangerous to be in the desert all alone. The fact that this woman is out there alone at the hottest time of the day tells us that she had no friends, no family, that even her own people had rejected her. This woman needs living water, the water of love, the water of life.

But, there’s another problem, another barrier between these two. She was a Samaritan. The enemy. Ritually unclean. At that time, Jews would have avoided traveling through Samaria but would have instead taken the extra nine hours to go around. And yet, Jesus seems to have told his disciples to journey right into enemy territory, in order to be in the place he needed to be that day.

So what happens between these two is truly astonishing. Nothing short of miraculous. These two strangers, these two enemies, these two whose worlds should never have connected—these two discover that they need each other.
Jesus seems to know everything about the woman’s life. He speaks truth to her, and in that honesty and grace offers her living water. She so needed the fresh, living water only he could provide, to find healing and wholeness and a whole new life. And Jesus needed fresh water to drink to stay alive, water she could draw from the well in her bucket. At the well, we see that the Jewish Jesus and the Samaritan woman need each other to live. At the well, these two enemies connect in order for life to continue. At the well, these two discover how new life can spring forth.

The hope that is found in bridging the differences that divide us from one another in this world, indeed from our own deepest humanity, is a powerful and life-giving message for our time.

All that being said, what a strange situation we find ourselves in hearing this very story in this Year of our Lord 2020. The year of the coronavirus. Hearing this story at the very time when medical experts, our governmental leaders, Rotary and other non-profits and even leaders in the church and other faith communities are urging us to take seriously what is called “social distancing” as the best possible way of mitigating the spread of this virus. Social distancing. I didn’t even know that term a week ago. Today, we are all being asked to do everything within our power to help curb the spread of the virus. We’re being asked to separate ourselves from one another lest we spread the virus to someone without even knowing that we’ve done so.

It’s one thing to ask those who feel ill to stay home. That’s good hygiene and thoughtfulness. But the larger problem now is that we can carry this virus for five or so days before any symptoms appear. And during that period of time, we could unwittingly spread it to others. And that’s especially dangerous when thinking of the most vulnerable members of our fellowship—seniors, anyone with a compromised immune system or other respiratory issues.

Those of us in the faith community need to ask ourselves: what is the most responsible thing to do? What changes need we make in the forms of our life together so as to safeguard our fellow members? How do we practice social distancing for the sake of others in ways that give honor to God and embody compassion for all?

As I said to you in my Special Announcement that went out last week, we will continue to monitor and assess the situation. And in conversation with the leaders of the congregation, we may well need to decide to discontinue worship services for some period of time, choosing voluntary social distancing out of respect and concern for all.

Fortunately, we already have in place a variety of means of building bridges of love to God and to one another should this choice be made. Our worship services are available via livestream and we can create a beautiful alternative that would include music, sermon and prayers. We can pray for one another and hold one another in the bonds of love. We can pray for those impacted by this virus and for all caregivers, medical personnel, and those working to provide treatment and an effective vaccine. Using ZOOM and other technologies, we can meet in small groups. We can….well, the sky’s the limit! This crisis might just bring out oodles of creativity that we haven’t tapped until now. We can build bridges of love to God and to one another in many, many ways.

We will keep you informed as we live into the days and weeks ahead.

God moves in mysterious ways, but God is never far from us, no matter where we are. God never lets us go. God never gives up on us. God is always just a prayer away with new life and hope. And like Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we need one another for life itself.

Let me conclude this morning in the spirit of the season with these words, part of what is called the Prayer of St. Patrick, said to have been written on his breastplate. May we write these words on our hearts as we walk together into a new future with hope:


I arise today, through God’s strength to pilot me, God’s might to uphold me, God’s wisdom to guide me, God’s eye to look before me, God’s ear to hear me, God’s word to speak for me, God’s hand to guard me God’s shield to protect me, God’s host to save me…

AMEN.