

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz
University Congregational United Church of Christ
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*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me save that thou art.
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.*

(“Be Thou My Vision”, an ancient Irish text
translated by Mary E. Byrne, versified by Eleanor
H. Hull.)

The Gospel story today is a story about where God happens. A God who happens not “out there” somewhere but right here between us as we see each other with eyes of love and compassion and hear one another with ears of grace and truth. The story starts with a simple request:

So Jesus 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.)

Abby, you have a water glass in front of you.
I say, ‘I’d sure like a drink!’ What do you do?

(Abby brings a glass of water to me.)

(I drink.)

“Thanks!”

It starts with a simple request.

But unlike Abby, the woman at the well can’t see it and hear it for the simple request that it is. Instead of getting him a cup of water, she says, “What’s up? How come you are doing this?” She interprets his simple request with ears of suspicion. There are a number of reasons why the woman at the well can’t hear Jesus’ request for what it is:

She's a woman and in Jesus' time women and men who aren't in the same family aren't supposed to talk to one another in public. In Jesus' time, there were a group of very "holy" men who took this rule all very seriously. They were called "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses!

She's a Samaritan. In Jesus' time, the Jews and Samaritans had an 800 year old history of hating each other. That's a lot of accumulated hate.

Finally, she's not exactly a candidate for citizen of the month in Sychar. In Jesus' time, women came to the city well in the early morning when it was cool. Not in the heat of the noonday sun. The only woman who would come to the well at this time of day was someone that other people didn't want to be seen with. That other's gossiped about.

The woman at the well has her reasons to be suspicious and not hear the simple request that Jesus is making.

But Jesus doesn't even go there. Doesn't even go there at all to talk about her past hurt and history and societal prejudice. No. He goes right on and starts talking to her about "living water". He says, "If you knew who was asking you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you, living water". In other words, Jesus wants to recall her to Life. To Life. To that something in all of us deeper than all our past histories and hurt, wounds and grief, all that divides us from each other. He wants to recall her to Life

Today, all of us are thirsty. Every one of us here. And there are things keeping all of us from Life. A lot – personally and globally - standing in the way, keeping us from Life.

Like the woman at the well, we too have our past histories, our past experiences, our hurts that shape the way we hear each other, look at the world and interpret our everyday experiences.

A wise mentor once told me, "We all have been hurt more deeply than we even know". The years since have shown me it is true. We all have had experiences of being hurt. But sometimes those experiences of hurt are all we see. He see and hear all of our present experiences and encounters through that lens. Everywhere we look we find one more example of people who are out to hurt us

We all have had experiences of being ignored. Sometimes that is all we hear. We hear it again and again in all of our encounters and experiences – "See! One more time! No one is listening to me!"

We are bored. "Mom, my mood ring says, 'Boring!'" And everywhere around us we see Boring! Boring! Boring! Boring!

It's like we are all plugged in. But sometimes we are listening to the wrong frequency. We are plugged into AM – “Against Me Radio”. Do you know that frequency? We hear, “Everyone is out to get me!”
“No one loves me.”
“No one listens to me.”
We hear it everywhere we turn.

Jesus shows up and says, “Change the frequency!”

Turn the dial to FM – “For Me Radio.”
It makes a huge difference.

Instead of hearing, “Nobody likes me”, we hear, “I am lovable.”

Instead of hearing, “Everyone is out to get me”, we hear, “I feel good about myself, my decisions and choices.”

Instead of hearing, “I am bad”, we hear “I am a good guy. Not perfect (as if that is the point!) – but wonderfully imperfect.

It is helpful just to notice what frequency we are plugged into.
What frequency are you tuned into?

I grew up listening to Mr. Rogers. He was a pastor and he ministered to me as a little kid and continues to do so. He said all the time, “I like you just the way you are.”

When I hear someone say, “I like you just the way you are” or “I love you” my response is not, “You know, I really am a great guy! I wish everyone else knew that!” No. Instead, it is like my heart breaks open and I want to reflect the love that you see in me. I just want to be the lovable guy that you see in me.

Jesus wants the woman at the well to be restored to Life. Out of the imprisonment of her past hurt and history to Live! To just Live. To be free to reflect the Love he sees in her. Jesus doesn't want anything less from us.

Jesus goes on.

Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”

The woman answered him, “I have no husband.”

Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

The story continues with a second request.

The woman at the well has a second opportunity to really hear Jesus – or not.

She hears his request, “Go call your husband” and takes a kind of half step, tells a half truth. “I have no husband.” She is still a bit suspicious of this guy.

And Jesus responds by taking a whole step and telling her the whole truth. He knows that she has had five husbands and the one she has now is not her husband.

Jesus says, “I know who you are.” It is not what he says to her but how he says it. It is not, “I know you!!!!” (said accusingly) But, “I know you.” (said, openly, tenderly) It makes all the difference.

Jesus says, “If there is anything on your heart that says you can’t talk to me, forget it! I see you. The real you. I see you with eyes of love and compassion.”

Much keeps us from being real with each other. We don’t know if we really want to be known. If we are ourselves, will people really like us? Maybe you have had experiences in the past when people didn’t.

Much keeps us from speaking to each other in truth. Oh, we have our excuses. We say we want to protect people – we don’t want to hurt their feelings. We don’t want them to get mad. So we settle for a kind of half truth.

We settle for a kind of half truth and a half life. We settle for being captive to our past experiences of hurt in being real and speaking the truth in love. We settle for repeating our past behaviors instead of being freed to imagine and live a new way to be in relationship with each other – a way of being real, a way of truth.

What about you?

How do you talk with the people in your life?

Do you?

If you are stuck, what do you do?

Have you stopped talking, stopped being real, stopped telling the truth?

Or do you make God happen like Jesus did by speaking the truth in love

Jesus responds to the woman at the well by revealing himself. He shows her how it is done. If she is determined to hide who she really is, Jesus will step out and show her more of himself. She says to him, “I know that the Messiah is coming”. He says, “I am he”.

It is an amazing moment. It is the first time in the Gospel of John that Jesus reveals himself to another living soul. Right there in the blazing overhead light of the noonday sun, all the rules, taboos, fears that could separate these two souls fall away. They are two souls, real, authentic with each other.

As one writer put it, “The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are”. (Barbara Brown Taylor, “Reflections on the Lectionary”, The Christian Century, February 12, 2008, p.19)

Whenever that happens, when we are just real with each other, you know that Jesus is there. Just know it.

And she is a changed woman. A changed woman. The disciples come back from the grocery store and say out-loud what she had been thinking at the beginning of the story, “What in the world are you doing talking to her?!”

And it’s like she doesn’t even hear it. It doesn’t even phase her. For she has been recalled to Life!

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?”

She sheds all of her past doubt and fear and suspicion and history and hurt and runs right down there to the middle of the city square and cries out, “Come and See! Come and See!

Come and see the one who recalls us to life! Who sees past all the hurt in us, all the guilt in us. Someone who sees us as no one has seen us before with eyes of love and compassion!

Come and see the one who has heard us as no one has heard us before – with ears of grace and truth!

Come and See the one who recalls us to Life!

Here is our work as church:

Let us be a people who look together at Jesus and through Jesus to God.

To nudge one another, say, “Look at that!”

Look at that! See that! Hear that! This Jesus who looks at us with eyes of love and compassion, hears us with ears of grace and truth. Can you believe it!

A God who meets us, who happens right here and now between us. Not just then and there but here and now as we see past our histories and hurts and see each other as Jesus does with eyes of love and compassion. To hear each other past our own doubt and fear and hear each other as Jesus does with ears of grace and truth.

This is the place where we get to practice doing that together

So let us be the church, a re-imagined church, in our relationships that are our life.

Let us make God happen here and now with one another. Amen.

