

## Death of Empathy

Liturgical Year A

Seeds of Faith

March 5, 2023

John 4:5-42

As I sit at my desk on February 4<sup>th</sup>. writing a piece for March 5<sup>th</sup> the Pro Bowl will begin Sunday afternoon. For the safety of the players the teams will be playing flag football, coached by Peyton and Eli Manning who are not coaches. The game will also include skills liked best catch, precision passing, dodgeball, Kick Tac Toe etc.

A story I often repeat has to do with my first class in Old Testament. The very first words from the mouth of Dr. Brueggemann were, “whatever you think you know about the Old Testament is probably wrong.” In my case he was right on. What I was taught in college about the Bible resembled flag football, it was not real.

Our text from the Gospel of John is the real thing. Shatner in Star Trek is famous for saying, “where no man has gone before.” If we are willing to un-learn some of our past Biblical prejudices our scripture will take us to new places where few have traveled.

On this second Sunday in Lent, I plan only to discuss one piece of scripture. This scripture alone would take a book to cover but I only have three to four pages. Besides covering only one text I plan to stretch its meaning into another realm.

Twice in seminary my interpretation of the text received failing marks by the iron hands of Nolte. Once I characterized the then building of the St. Louis arche to the tower of Babel and the encounter I had with a rock in the middle of the road to the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Having a lousy history on Biblical interpretation I will once again enlighten you with my way.

If you took the time to read the text, John 4:5-42 you will have recalled that Jesus and his merry men of disciples went on a long hike. Palestine from North to South is about 120 miles according to Barclay. The country is divided into three divisions, Galilee in the North, Judea in the South and Samaria in the middle.

The average Jew traveling between Galilee and Judea would skip going through the “Black” slums of Samaria and bypass the area all together making the trip last six days instead of three. For many years there was great hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans, they were seen as foreigners, a mixed breed. Following the death of King Solomon around 932 BCE the kingdom divided between the North Israel and the South Judah, and the feud between the Jews and the Samaritans began. Talk about holding a grudge.

Along comes Jesus and his feet are sore and he is growing weary of dwelling on ancient enemies and he had grown tired of imaginary enemies like Blacks, people gathering at our southern borders trying to come to the United States and members of the LGBTQ.

Our scripture is fraught with symbolism. We have here a story of love, truth telling and redemption. Jesus, as always, is concerned with showing his human side, expressing warmth and sympathy for the other, neighborly gesture, and breaking down barriers between us and them.

While traveling through Samaria Jesus stops in a small mountain town called, Sychar, Shekhan, at Jacobs Well. This plot of land was ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Wells were the melting pot of circumstances. Wells were reserved for women to gather water and enjoy a social interaction between one another. The water was usually collected in the early morning to avoid the heat of the day.

We have Jesus stopping at the well at noon, with no bucket to gather water and he sits and waits. In the heat of the day, while his disciples are off getting food, Jesus is met by a solitary figure, a woman. Some pious Rabbis would even close their eyes whenever they were met by a woman.

We are about to have the longest conversation of Jesus in the Gospel of John and it happens to be with a woman, with his eyes wide open. This woman has no name, and we can only assume that she was not well liked by the women who came early in the day to fetch water.

Jesus was not preoccupied with her being a Samaritan woman despised by Jews, nor her sins. With the lack of empathy many of us display today Jesus sat with her, open to her many questions, and Jesus was able to see the suffering on others and he displayed mercy.

During their honest and open face to face conversation, barriers of sexism, prejudice and healing of old divisions were mended. Stay with me here when I speak of symbolism. The part concerning the five husbands symbolizes for me her frantic search to find peace and love. What short lived Samaritan woman would have the time to marry five times? Some suggest the five husbands represent the five idolatrous people recorded in 11 Kings 17, Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath and Stepharvaim. For me the "five" symbolizes the many times we try to fill our empty lives with new things. All the fun is in the buying or the getting of something new but that soon becomes old and unfulfilling.

In the heat of the day a woman meets a man who offers living water, a new way to life, and Jesus hangs around for another two days face to face, mending walls with those who no longer feel like strangers.

Reconciliation with our enemies those with different skin color than ours, different sexual preferences than ours, different religious beliefs

than ours will take some sitting down looking one another in the eye. Being open and honest and showing some compassion, love and empathy takes time and work. Many of us have searched through “five husbands/wives” looking for the right other and Jesus reminds us that the living water already lives in us. We just need to accept what is already ours.

I have no trouble receiving living water it is freely given to us all. The death of empathy I am experiencing in our country can be countered with face-to-face conversations and understanding. Our culture of hatred and prejudiced can be changed.

Dennis Siebert