**March 8th 2020** **Close Encounters of the Best Kind-2)Samaritan Woman**

**Rev. Gary McAnally John 4:4-42**

--Season of Lent

Second week in Lent – a time of inward reflection, time of drawing closer to God in prayer and meditation, seeking understanding. This is a time when we reflect on our journey of faith, the journey of our ordinary life, a journey that leads us closer to God, or, on other paths of our own making.

--Series

This is also the second week of our Lenten series where we are looking at “Close Encounters” between characters in the Bible and Jesus. Everyday “Close Encounters” of the “Best” kind. Each encounter invites us to get to know the character a little more intimately, to go a little deeper into their encounter, their conversation with Jesus.

Last week Ron explored the meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus. Remember how Nicodemus, under the cover of darkness, sought Jesus out, wanting to know more about Jesus without exposing himself to the criticism of the other Pharisees. The conversation is one sided with Nicodemus making one statement and asking two questions. The bulk of the conversation is carried by Jesus before Nicodemus, confused about being born anew, he disappears from the scene. Nicodemus was a well- respected member of the religious establishment, a man of privilege, prominence and power.

This week we explore a person at the other end of power and influence. The Samaritan woman had none of the privilege, prominence or power of Nicodemus. You might say that Nicodemus occupied the top rung on the pecking order while the Samaritan woman was clinging on to the bottom rung.

{--Samaritan Women at the Well}

If we explore the key parts of her story we find that she had several strikes against her before she met Jesus at the well in the mid-day sun .

**First, she was a Samaritan.**

Samaritan’s were considered ritually unclean, half breads who intermarried between earlier Hebrews of the Northern Kingdom and other races settled in Samaria after captivity by the Assyrians. Other non-Jews also occupied their land and their worship was not considered true or pure by the Jewish people. Samaritans strayed from monotheism and sometimes worshipped other gods. A self-respecting Jew thought that contact with Samaritans would make them unclean and would go out of their way to not travel across the land of Samaria.

{Note that our story has Jesus defying convention and traveling through Samaria on his way to Galilee}

**Second, she was a woman**. Compare her situation to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is male, Jewish and a religious authority – an insider all the way. The Samaritan woman couldn’t have been more of an outsider. She is Samaritan, and a woman, and being a woman in first century Palestine was difficult and challenging at best.

A woman was often considered little more than property, with the husband being able to divorce her as his discretion . There are stories of many a Jewish man starting the day with a prayer to God, expressing thanks that he was neither a Gentile, a slave, or a woman!

A Hebrew man did not talk with women in the street – not even with his mother, sister, daughter or wife. {could lead to divorce??}

William Barclay tells of a segment of the Pharisees known as the “bleeding and bruised” Pharisees. When they saw a woman approaching, they would close their eyes, hence, were running into things constantly! (1956, 142-143).

Traveling alone to the well mid-day, implies that in addition to being a Samaritan, and a woman, she appears to have been an outsider within her own village.

Finally, the Samaritan woman in our reading has often been represented as a sinful woman in need of salvation who is exposed by Jesus in this story.

While the text reports that the woman had been married five times and was living with a man who was not her husband, there is no mention of sinfulness in this text and no word of judgment or even an encouragement to change her life. Her five husbands could have died or divorced her. First century Palestine was a hard and dangerous place for a woman. One thing we know, she has had a difficult life, filled with troubles and sorrows.

With this background, let’s look at the “encounter” between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well.

{Jesus and the Disciples journey north from Juda toward Galilee, not around but through Samaria – Was Jesus not concerned about what others think about the Samaritans? Or just wanting the most direct path?}

The distance from Jerusalem to Galilee is about 62 miles. Jesus and the disciples head out and reach Sychar about mid-day. Having traveled over 20 miles they are hot, tired, thirsty and hungry. The disciples head off to find food while Jesus remains behind, resting by the well.

While Jesus is resting by the well a Samaritan woman comes to well to draw water.

- Jesus breaks a societal convention – starts conversation with

a woman– He asks for water.

She shows her independence, her strength by engaging, challenging the

stranger, again, against the social norms of the times.

Jesus – responds - hinting about who he is and brings up the idea of his giving living water –

She doesn’t get it – thinks he is talking literally about water

– again she challenges him - he has no bucket and who does he think he is?

Is he greater than Jacob?

Jesus responds – this water from the well is fine but you will be thirsty again, but the those who drink from the water he gives will never be thirsty again. In fact, this living water will become like a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

The woman is still not understanding and asks for this living water so she will

never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water . . .

**--Seeing**

Something happens as Jesus shifts from the conversation about water,

and almost like for the first time, he sees the woman. The conversation changes from a bickering between outsiders to a deeper more intimate encounter.

It’s like he truly sees the woman for who she is, all of her troubles, all of her sorrows. He tells her about her life and who she really is. - -

And, something happens between then, their relationship changes.

When Jesus shows the woman that he knows her, that he sees her for all her struggles, pain and sorrow, she comes to understand she is in the presence of someone special, maybe, the one she has been waiting for.

She then shifts her part of the conversation, and sees Jesus, like for the first time, acknowledging him as a prophet and engages him on a question of faith and worship.

I was intrigued by this idea of seeing someone differently and what it might mean to truly see someone, see them deeply as Jesus saw the Samaritan woman. While we are quick with a simple hi or hello, other cultures greetings can be deeper and more meaningful. Among some tribes in South Africa, their greeting can be defined as “I see you.” This greeting can take 5 to 15 seconds as they face each other and look directly into each other’s eyes. If you are a member of the tribe, you would reply “I am here.” The order of the exchange is important with the rough English translation being “when you see me you bring me into existence.” I like that. When you see me, when you know me, who I am, what I am, you bring me into existence. . . . When you really see me and we are interconnected, my life changes. . .

In the blockbuster movie Avatar, you will see this greeting by the native people of Pandora. When they say “I see you” it means I see the love and your feelings and your soul and you mean everything to me.

I can almost hear Jesus say “I see you” to the Samaritan woman, and she replies “I am here.” Jesus sees her as a child of God, full of issues and troubles, but also full of potential for the coming kingdom of God.

--Jesus, maybe shifting in his approach to the woman and the idea of insiders and outsiders as he tells her that the things that separate them will be changing, are changing now. That national ideas of where to worship or even how to worship were breaking down and that what was important was to worship the Father in spirit and truth. The location and maybe the process wasn’t as important as seeking and worshipping in spirit and truth. The things that had divided and separated them were irrelevant, . . . .

For the first time in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells someone that he is the Messiah. Not his Disciples, not the Jewish leadership, but he tells a woman, an outcast, a Samaritan woman.

This bickering, argumentative encounter has changed into an intimate exchange of seeking and receiving the Messiah. It changed not by convincing arguments, quoting of scripture or brow beating. But when Jesus shared with the woman that he truly and deeply saw her, saw her heart, saw her troubles and sorrows, the woman opened herself to Jesus, to the hope of the Messiah. She was able to seek deeper understanding of her faith and find hope for the future, maybe feeling completed and made whole in Jesus.

{She opened herself – Jesus saw her -

At this point she leaves the well (without her water Jar) and returns to her village, full of this new joy and hope for the future. She rounds up the villagers, telling them to COME AND SEE what she has found.

--Come and See – reminds us of Jesus calling his first disciples – Come and see (Beginning of John’s Gospel - Jn 39 & 46)

Our scripture tells us that many Samaritans from the city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.

*(quotes from sources about Samaria being open and receptive to early Christian evangelists – many give credit to this woman – suggesting that she was an effective missionary for Jesus in 1st century Samaria.)*

~~Postscript:~~

This Samaritan woman and her village were not the only ones changed in this story.

Jesus was also impacted / changed by this close encounter:

“Seeing” the Samaritan woman – the depth of her heart / sorrows / and maybe potential – Maybe his encounter with the woman encouraged him to see the Samaritans as ready for the harvest –

The disciples returned with food but Jesus no longer hungry or thirsty !

Instead he engages the disciples telling them “open your eyes and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest.”

He explains that he isn’t interested in eating because “I have food that you do not know about” – Maybe Jesus was fed by his encounter with the Samaritan woman and was excited by the potential harvest, telling his disciples –“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work”

This harvest that would bring countless others to believe and to follow Jesus.

--Close

This encounter, this intimate, close encounter, reminds us to take the time to truly SEE those in our lives. To take the time to listen, to put in the energy to SEE the depth, the sorrows, the hopes and dreams of those we encounter. And maybe, as importantly to open ourselves to others that they might know us and understand the depth of our lives.

May we have the faith and courage of the Samaritan woman and be able to open ourselves, fully and completely to God and acknowledge that God knows us better than we know ourselves.

As we continue our Lenten journeys, let us be willing to come as we are to a life changing, intimate, close encounter with Jesus.

Amen –