

Sermon, Third Sunday in Lent, March 15, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

“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.” (John 4:28-30)

“They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” (Psalm 69:21)

‘After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.”’ (John 19:28)

We learn in chapter 3 of John that Jesus has just been in the Judean countryside baptizing along with his disciples. John is there as well, also baptizing. Now Jesus is on the way back to Galilee. At the scene’s opening, we are told that Jesus has come to the Samaritan city of Sychar, the site of Jacob’s well. We also learn that it is noon. A time when most would get out of the desert heat. The disciples have left the scene in order to go buy food. Jesus is alone.

Then a Samaritan woman approaches the well to draw water. Clean drinking water is essential for human life. Coming to this well is a necessary daily activity—and hard work. The fact that this woman feels compelled to come draw water at the hottest part of the day, when carrying a heavy water jar would be most difficult, is telling. One of the things that moves me about this story is the demonstrated humanity of Jesus. He gets tired. He stops to sit and rest. He asks for a drink. I have always found Jesus’ most poignant words from the cross to be, “I am thirsty.” (John 19:28)

The Samaritan woman seems taken aback at his request. She asks bluntly, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Jesus’ answer is startling. “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.” She then observes sardonically that the well is deep, and he has no bucket. Somehow, Jesus is able to get beneath the cynicism of her question. His response goes to what he perceives as being her real longing: “living water.” She needs real water to live. However, there seem to be circumstances in her experience that have constricted her life. She comes to the well at the worst time possible. Yet isn’t that when we, too, encounter Jesus?

Jesus then shows the woman that he has seen into her soul. He tells her “everything that she has ever done.” Jesus has not done this to condemn her, to diminish her, or to add to her burdens. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench...” (Isaiah 42:3) He mirrors back to her, her story: the deep truth of it. *And then her story changes.* Somewhere in their exchange Jesus has managed to impart that “spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” No wonder the disciples are astonished on their return! Clearly something amazing has happened between two people who ordinarily would not speak to each other. The Samaritan woman’s story is opened up, its meaning transformed. Before our eyes Jesus has created a disciple and an apostle. Carrying that new “living

water” within, she leaves her water jar—laying down that burden—and goes back to the city to lead others to the Messiah.

Sharing our stories is a wonderful thing, especially when we sensitize ourselves to God’s presence and guidance. Some of you may have had the opportunity to write down and share your spiritual autobiography—maybe many times. Sometimes in the telling we may realize that what we thought was an immutable part of our story is, in God’s hands, subject to transformation after all. We too are invited to set down our water jars. In Psalm 81:6 we hear, “I relieved your shoulder from the burden; your hands were freed from the basket.” Sometimes this release happens in an instant, sometimes it takes a lifetime.

I think one of Jesus’ more profound gifts as a healer is that ability to see the condition of a person’s soul, the truth of a person’s story, however difficult or lovely. Then, as if creating a beautiful mosaic, he gently rearranges the pieces to align with God’s pattern. Romans is probably my favorite epistle of Paul’s, and today’s is powerful. It sums up the themes of today’s Gospel:

“Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Peace, grace, hope: living water indeed.

My mother died when I was thirty years old. That same year I was confirmed as an Episcopalian. During the two years she was ill with some kind of chronic liver disease (never fully diagnosed) she did not tell me that she was terminally ill. I did not understand, thinking I was “adult” enough to know the truth. It created tension and resentment between me and my father. He was deeply frustrated by my apparent denial of her condition. My mother’s death, my grief at losing her as a young woman, and my lack of understanding of the circumstances became an indelible part of my “story.” (Thankfully I had another thirty years with my father. He, honest to a fault, told me everything about his own gradually failing health in later years). Whenever I retold my spiritual autobiography, this was always a significant event.

About fifteen years ago I had to have a surgical biopsy. It turned out all was well, and continues to be. I chose not to tell my father. Then it hit me—bludgeoned me really. I felt I had made that decision to keep him, now older, from worry. However, I realized I needed to forgive my mother. I sought the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The priest to whom I confessed did not mince words: this was a pretty big sin. Then that inner spring of grace bubbled up between us. The priest was a parent. He explained that perhaps to my mother I was still a child—her child—whom she wanted to protect at all costs. This was the truth. I knew it in that moment. The priest then affirmed: “You loved her.” I nodded. “You still love her.”

“Yes,” I said. My relationship with my mother was transformed, brought into the present moment. What I thought was my “story” *did not have to be*. Every so often I dream that my mother has called me on the phone. I never remember what she actually says. It doesn’t matter. I know what the message is.

The liturgy of the Eucharist is itself a narrative of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. By participating in its enactment week by week, one is reminded of one’s identity as a child of God and one’s connection to our neighbors. It provides hope and sustenance for individuals and communities. It reminds us that our lives are not bounded by death but by the resurrected Christ. (Stanley Hauerwas, *Growing Old in Christ*, p. 197)