

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

3.8.26 - Lent 3

Today's Gospel is a healing balm for these times. Two people from different sides of a border meet. But there are no missiles thrown, no bombs dropped, no one's leader is kidnapped or beheaded. No one is thrown into a police car and sent to prison. Instead the two people talk to each other. They see each other. They both leave the encounter changed.

Jesus is passing through foreign territory on his way back home. He meets a Samaritan woman at a well and asks her for a drink. They share deep conversation. He sees her as a woman who has had trials in life, someone not afraid to challenge him. She sees him as a prophet, the Messiah.

The text says, Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans. This is an understatement. Samaritans and Jews are enemies; each considers the other to be totally wrong about how they worship and how they see God. They are not so much enemies like Iran and the US. Jews and Samaritans share a language, and as the woman points out, they have common ancestors. They are enemies of the kind that are closer to home for us. Maybe each at best thinks the other is deluded, the unfortunate victim of propaganda and conspiracy theories. At worst, each thinks the other is a little bit evil.

Jews and Samaritans do not share things in common.

But Jesus is thirsty. He asks for water.

We could read the exchange that follows as Jesus trying to dismiss the woman, and she won't have it.

JESUS: Give me a drink.

WOMAN: Why are you talking to me? You're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan!

JESUS: Do you even know who I am? I don't even need your water. I have my own, living water.

WOMAN: What is this living water you are talking about? And explain to me what your people say about Jerusalem, and the Messiah.

JESUS: Go get your husband.

WOMAN: I have no husband, and stop trying to change the subject.

If the woman had just given him water, maybe Jesus would have gone on his way without ever talking to her. This whole reading would have been over in two lines! But the woman doesn't let Jesus off that easily. It's not clear he was prepared for a whole theological discussion, but the woman pulls it out of him.

The woman reminds Jesus of their common ancestor, Jacob.

The woman sees Jesus, she listens to him intently, she makes him see and listen to her.

Now, let's understand that what preachers have often said before about the woman with her five husbands is not accurate. In no way do her multiple marriages mean that the woman has questionable morals, or lives a life like celebrities or reality TV stars of today. In Jesus' time, women did not make decisions about when or whom to marry. If a woman's husband died, it was expected that her brother-in-law would become her husband. Marriage for most people was not a matter of romance but survival. The woman's many marriages suggest that she has been through some trauma and loss in her life, that she is a survivor.

She is a survivor, she has been around the block, and so she is not fazed by Jesus basically giving her an order, trying to send her away to her husband, and even spouting his own beliefs to her about salvation and the Jews which are offensive to a Samaritan. She is not afraid to engage with this man who is a stranger, with this man who is supposed to be an enemy.

She calls Jesus out. She stops him in his tracks. Oh yes, he has to say as he begins to see the woman as a person. Oh yes, he has to admit, you have been through some things. And you have some things to say too.

Out of this conversation between the woman and Jesus there indeed flows living water. Living water, that is fresh, flowing water. The water spoken about in the Hebrew Bible, water from streams and rivers that is used for healing, water that nourishes fruit growing from the trees on its banks.

This conversation between the woman and Jesus brings healing and bears fruit, for both of them. The woman is the first in John's Gospel to hear Jesus say I AM, the name God uses for himself in speaking with Moses, the phrase Jesus uses so many times in John's Gospel to point to his divine nature, but he first uses it with the woman at the well.

The woman in turn, goes and tells the good news of Jesus. She says to her neighbors, “come and see,” using the same phrase Jesus said to the disciples earlier in this Gospel.

The woman becomes an apostle. Jesus gains a whole new group of followers. All because of two strangers, two enemies, who spoke to each other at a well.

And maybe I spoke a little wrong earlier when I said that Samaritans and Jews were not like Americans and Iranians. Because we all share common languages and common ancestors and common thirst for safety and peace and fruit and healing. And maybe that is an antidote to the despair of this latest violence and war, to listen to what Iranians and Iranian Americans are saying about it all, to listen and learn and be better informed about how to respond. Just like we need to make more of an effort to see and listen to our neighbors across political divides and social locations, to see what they have been through, and to learn.

Today’s Gospel indeed gives us hope and the promise of transformation. It goes even beyond talking to our neighbor or our enemy. Because if this woman, this Samaritan, who was not supposed to be an apostle, if she could recognize the Messiah in this stranger, this enemy and go and tell others, if she could be forever changed by seeing Jesus, what does that mean for us? How can we be changed by meeting Jesus, by meeting him in our prayer and in others?

And if Jesus, the Divine Son of God, the Messiah, the great I AM, can be changed by meeting a woman at a well, if he can be moved beyond his thirst and dismissiveness to really look at her and reveal himself to her, well what does that mean for us? How can we change God, how can we move the arc of the universe, the trajectories of bombs and the machinations of leaders, how can we change God through our prayer and our actions and our conversations with neighbors and enemies?

Consider this, St Martin’s, the next time you are passing through enemy territory and need a drink or snack. Consider this, the next time a stranger comes passing through your way. This could be Jesus. You could be Jesus for them. Just like Jesus and the woman at the well, your meeting with them, your conversation, could change you both. It could change everything. Amen.