

“Finding Faith in the Wilderness” 3-19-17

Old Testament, Exodus 17: 1-7

New Testament, John 4: 4-42

Growing up, cultural boundaries, social and racial distinctions were made very clear to me. There were people appropriate for me to associate with and there were those who were not. Fear was instilled within me toward particular groups of people who would like to harm me if they could. Certain groups could be condescended to with polite behavior but never taken on an equal basis.

As a follower of Christ I have had to relearn many things when it comes to relating with different people across cultural, social, and racial lines. That is why this passage intrigues me. It is all about Jesus challenging our racial and social stereotypes, who is in and who is out.

We read this passage in the context of current xenophobic politics and a recent 20% rise in hate crimes against, in particular, Muslims and Jews. There is, as William Willimon writes, a neurology of xenophobia. It is biological. We judge whether the events or persons whom we encounter will hurt or help us on the basis of whether they minimize danger or maximize reward. The emotion of fear reduces our ability to think clearly and assimilate new information leading to mistakes in perception and interpretation and false deductions. We end up responding negatively to people and situations.

A paid spokesperson for the NRA said that he opposed any change in America’s gun laws. Why? Because widespread gun ownership is the only thing that is protecting us from the Islamic terrorists who hate us and are attempting to kill us (Willimon, ‘Fear of the Other’, pp.23-24).

Jews and Samaritans hated and feared each other, as evidenced in this passage. As the disciples return from their errands they discover Jesus interacting with this Samaritan woman. John writes, “They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or ‘Why are you speaking with her?’” Perhaps they were thinking, ‘Jesus, we know that you love all people, but surely not someone like her’.

Jesus is calling you and me not only to acknowledge our xenophobia, but to go beyond and above what is humanly natural for us to do. My own journey of faith has led me to face such moments of self-judgment on more than one occasion.

One of those moments occurred for me in my last church. An African American woman in the church expressed grievances to me regarding prejudicial attitudes from members of the congregation. Many of them expressed to me that she was over sensitive and certainly no one was truly prejudiced. She saw and experienced it differently. So I invited her to go to lunch with me. I sincerely desired to understand her and establish a relationship with her.

She opened up about what it is like to be black in a white world. I could never truly understand her world, being white. She made her point, moving me to see beyond her skin color to a person who is no different in soul and heart than I am. We desire the same things, respect and love, acceptance, and the

ability to do so for others. It was in that moment that I saw my own complicity in racism. Able to own and say to her that I had been raised to be prejudice, I asked for her forgiveness and to be my teacher, to instruct me and help me go beyond my personal blindness and an attitude that I did not want to admit that I had, and desired to change. We became very good friends and she one of my strongest supporters and I her advocate when others described her in prejudicial terms.

Jesus wants to be the one who informs my attitude toward others. In this passage he is leading us by example. I love how he takes the initiative. He approaches her and says, "Give me a drink". She is at that well with no expectation that anything in her life is going to change. Of course, I didn't either. Before the love of Christ touched my heart and opened my eyes to new possibilities of what Jesus wanted to make of me and have me do I had no clue that those possibilities existed.

John is utilizing metaphor, irony, and wordplay throughout this text. Jesus is breaching social convention. She responds to his request; "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Expanding the conversation to another level, Jesus engages her soul and spirit; "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". In most religions women are considered inferior to men. The disciples reflect this view in their response as they marvel that Jesus is even talking to this woman, a Samaritan at that.

Jesus challenges our own attitudes on multiple levels. He would ask us what we have done for the down and out, the needy, and the lonely. We hear echoes of Matthew 25:40 when Jesus states, "Inasmuch as you have done unto one of the least of these my brethren...You have done it to me".

Jesus retorts, "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". We immerse ourselves in our careers, the pursuit of economic security, pursuing values contrary to those of Christ, often oblivious to how unsatisfying and fleeting, they are, unaware of the path's end in pursuit of those things. And Jesus can only respond to our false pursuits, "If you knew..."

A moment of grace is being enacted before our eyes. Such moments are available to anyone. What a contrast to our political landscape. "Politics deals with externals, borders, wealth, crimes. Authentic forgiveness deals with the evil in a person's heart, something for which politics has no cure. Virulent evil spreads throughout society like an airborne disease. The cure, like a vaccine, must be applied one person at a time. When moments of grace do occur, the world must pause, fall silent and acknowledge that indeed forgiveness offers a kind of cure" (Yancey, "What's So Amazing About Grace", *Homiletics*, March-April, 2017, p.32).

Enticed by Jesus' offer of living water, he says to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back". Being honest that she has no husband, Jesus confirms her comment and tells her that she has had five husbands. One perceives observation, not judgement, allowing her to now engage the deeper spiritual conversation as she recognizes Jesus' prophetic nature.

Caught up in theological debate of the proper place of worship, Jesus pulls her into the transcendent reality of what God is about and is doing through him in the world. Samaritans believe that one can only worship God on Mount Gerizim in Samaria where Joshua made the final covenant with the people after entering the holy land. Jews felt that Jerusalem is the theological center of worship. Against the cultural and racial tensions, Jesus indicates that the Messianic age has begun. All old tensions as to the place of true worship are passing as God is to be worshipped in “spirit and truth”. Here cultural and social taboos are broken and transformed. The gift of living water is offered someone outside the house of Israel. And it is a woman of questionable moral character.

The question for us must be raised as we follow the Spirit’s implication of this text. How are we still like the disciples, still reluctant to offer the living water of Jesus to those different from us we deem unworthy? But isn’t that the point? Who is worthy of God’s grace?

All peoples, races, and cultures, stand on equal ground at the foot of the cross. We need to follow Jesus and enter into conversations with one another across racial and cultural lines to deeper levels of transparency in the presence of Christ. We must check culture and race at the door. We can’t say to our African neighbors and others simply to do it our way to get along. One of my professors, Peter Wagner, called this the “Creator Complex”, an attempt on our part to make other people into our image.

Do we or they give up our cultural identity to make it work? No, but our passion for human culture must always remain subject to the culture of the kingdom of God, the culture of Christ and the cross. The responsibility remains with us, the majority, than with those of the minority among us. We cannot simply ask them to adjust their attitudes and actions and to adapt to our cultural forms alone. This only creates an obstacle to inclusion.

The reality is that together we embody a unique expression of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, bringing together distinct aspects of who God is so that as Paul writes in Ephesians, the church is “filled entirely with the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18-19).

Intentional and ongoing effort is required. We witness to the glory of God as we pray and work out the issues and complexity of race and culture. We find ways to talk with each other and do things together so that the Holy Spirit can find ways to work with us. That is what Jesus did with the woman at the well.

Engaging that conversation with my African American woman friend opened the door for the Holy Spirit to work in both of our lives, bringing us together as we found common ground through the non-judgmental, reconciling work of Jesus Christ. Together I felt that we were becoming “the church”.

But my desire was that our conversation would go beyond us. I feel the same for FPC as our cultures seek to be intentional in finding ways to listen to and understand each other, individually and collectively.

This is hard work, but the blessings awaiting us are profound and potentially life-changing, just as it was for the Samaritan woman who met Jesus that day and his disciples who became embraced into that circle of Christ’s grace.

