

A Lent 3 3.15.20

John 4:5-42

Focus Statement: Jesus is for everyone.

Jesus was at the well at noon when the Samaritan woman came to him. This is as important a detail to this story as Nicodemus coming at night was to last week's Gospel. Nicodemus came at night so that others wouldn't know he was approaching Jesus. The woman came to the well at noon, so that others wouldn't be there when she arrived. Both sought anonymity. But while Nicodemus traveled at night in order to protect his status, the Samaritan woman went to the well at noon because her status was already gone.

Here's the thing we with indoor plumbing may not be aware of, it is hard work to transport water. Water is heavy and awkward, and transporting it is work better done in the coolness of the morning or with the evening breeze. That is when most women would have traveled to the well to fetch their family's daily water. This woman went at noon because she was unwelcomed at other times. She was, if you will, quarantined from the rest of her community. At this time of COVID-19 and the fear surrounding it, let me be clear that I use this word deliberately, though let me also unpack why.

There is a time and a place for quarantines and what we are doing today, watching a video in our homes, is one of those times. It is wise for those who have been exposed to a contagious illness that could be easily passed to others to stay outside of the community for a time until the threat of contagion has passed. It is wise for us who don't know if we've been exposed, if we could be carriers, to stay apart from each other for the good of each other. There is even examples of this in the Deuteronomic and Levitical laws in the Old

Testament, where those with a variety of illnesses are required to remain outside of the community until declared clear by a priest in order to protect the health of the rest of the community. This is good and wise practice.

But good and wise practice is not why the Samaritan woman was traveling to the well at the heat of the day. Her “quarantine,” if you will, was of a very different variety. There’s a page on the CDC website titled “Stigma and Resilience.” This page addresses people who may be experiencing stigma or discrimination due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including people of Asian descent, people who have traveled, and medical and healthcare workers. I’m sure we’ve heard, even laughed at, the jokes about people avoiding Chinese restaurants or Corona beer because of the outbreak. But social stigma, and the prejudice around it, is real. And this is not the only place we see it. Maybe you remember the accusation that those crossing the border carry diseases, or that all Muslims, or brown people in general, are terrorists, or insert stereotype here. There is a difference between healthy, appropriate social distancing for the good of the weakest among us and the fear driven accusation against “the other.” It is that sort of “quarantine” that drove the Samaritan woman to the well at noon, where she met Jesus.

And it is striking too that Jesus was at the well at noon. The Gospel reading started us at verse five, which leaves out some important details about how Jesus came to be in Samaria. So let us set the stage with those skipped verses. Last week, we heard about the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Following that, Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside where they spent some time teaching and baptizing. John also

was in the countryside, teaching and baptizing. When asked how John felt about Jesus, he reiterated his place as “not the Messiah, but [the one] sent head of him.” Which brings us to the start of chapter four. “Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’—although it was not Jesus but his disciples who baptized—he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.”

“But he had to go through Samaria.” Now here’s the thing about that. Jesus didn’t geographically HAVE to go through Samaria. In fact, most good, God-fearing Jews would not go through Samaria. Jesus had to go through Samaria not for travel reasons, but for theological reasons. He had to go through Samaria because there was something that needed to happen there to make clear a truth about who he was and what he’d come to do.

Jesus sat at this well in Samaria, where he, a good, Jewish teacher and leader did not belong, at noon, in the heat of the day, when a Samaritan approached. And, adding to the risk of cross-contamination, the Samaritan who approached was not just any Samaritan, but a woman. Good Jewish men did not mix with women of any sort, but especially not women who were not also Jews. And not just any non-Jewish woman. This woman had had not just one husband, but five, and was currently living with a man not her husband. One can assume this complicated marital situation is what sent her to the well in the middle of the day. That fear we all know is irrational but still feels so real, that poor fortune is contagious. That the reason for this woman’s complicated relationship history is in some way her fault, and that association with her will cause it, or her, to rub off on us. She is a sinner, don’t get to close.

But Jesus does get too close. Jesus gets right up in her business. “If you knew... [who I am] you would ask me for living water.” “You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.” “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” These are bold, declarative statements of who he is, who she is, and who God is. And when the disciples returned, confused and dismayed that Jesus had taken up with a Samaritan woman of all people, she ran right back to that village who has cast her aside with this message of hope and truth and promise, and the people came and were transformed.

So here’s the thing, friends. This is a scary time. There is a truly dangerous global pandemic sweeping across the world, and we are right to be cautious, we are right to be afraid. But we are not right to panic, we are not right to fear. Sure John Oliver is not a scientist, but his words seemed fairly representative of what was expressed on the CDC website, and way more memorable, when he recommended that the proper amount of concern is somewhere between gargling with bleach and licking subway poles. “If you’re gargling bleach,” Oliver quipped, “you need to calm down. And if you’re licking subway poles because you’re convinced the whole thing is a hoax and you’re invincible, well that’s just gross under any circumstances.” Our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, reflected this week on a treatise Martin Luther wrote in 1527 in response to the plague’s return to Wittenburg. Bishop Eaton wrote: “In [Luther’s treatises “Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague,”] he emphasized the duty to care for the neighbor, the responsibility of government to protect and provide services to its citizens, a caution about recklessness, and the importance of science, medicine and common sense. To provide care for the

neighbor, Luther recommended that pastors, those in public office, doctors and public servants should remain in the city. Luther himself remained in Wittenberg to care for his people. He recommended that public hospitals be built to accommodate those with the plague. He condemned those who took unnecessary risks that put themselves and others in danger of contagion. Luther also encouraged the use of reason and medicine, writing, "God has created medicines and has provided us with intelligence to guard and take care of the body. ... Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence." This five-hundred year old wisdom is still good wisdom. Do what the science says. Wash your hands, stay home if you're sick, if you're at high risk, or if you've been in contact with someone who's sick. As I wrote in the email announcing our decision to cancel worship and move to this online forum, this is about caring for our neighbors. And yet, we still find ways to worship, we still find ways to connect, we still find ways to care for each other. We still find ways to be the people of God for each other and in the world. All of this, by the way, not that we need a reason other than it is the thing we are freed in Christ to do, is also recommended by the CDC. These actions are good for our mental health. They create community resilience.

So while we are keeping safe social distance, while we are self-isolating or avoiding contact out of care of each other, it is important to remember that we live in a world where there are a myriad of ways to lean in, to like Jesus did with the Samaritan woman, to be close to one another, in ways that are healthy. And we need to do that as well. We need to, like Jesus did with the Samaritan woman, recognize the difference between actual contagion

and stigma and discrimination. We need to be alert to those among us who are at risk not just from the illness, but from the economic ramifications of the illness. We need to be aware of who is being pushed to the side by the overabundance of caution, and make care for them a concern. We need to get up in the business of those who are looking out for themselves alone and putting others at risk, through fear-mongering, sharing false information, downplaying the science, etc. It's easy, it's so easy, to get bad information. I was at the gym Tuesday, having just gotten off the CDC website. Both CNN and Fox News were covering the outbreak, their numbers were not the same, and neither matched the CDC's report.

And here's the final thing to remember, dear people of God. Jesus had to go to Samaria, because he had to make it abundantly clear that "The hour is coming, and is now here" in which we are God's. God is not bound to a time, place, or people, but God is active, alive, and in the world for all. God is the God of all that is and was and yet will be. As we heard read last week, God so loved not the Jews, not the Samaritans, not the Pharisees, the women, or even, the Christians, but God so loved the world. And getting too close to the much-feared Samaritan woman with a plethora of husbands is what God's love looks like in the flesh. In the face of the plague, so many years ago, Luther "also reminded his people and us that we should trust God's faithfulness and promises, particularly the promise eternal life. Paul writes: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8). Thanks be to God, who is with us, and for us, all of us. No matter what. Amen.