

Sunday March 12th, 2023

Lent III

John 4:5-42

“Are You Thirsty?”

The American writer, Samuel Clemens or better known as Mark Twain, wrote once that he was tired of all the discord he saw in the world. He wrote, “So, I built a cage, and in it I put a dog and a cat. After a little training I got the dog and the cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony together.

So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkestan, and a Buddhist from China, along with a Baptist missionary that I captured on some trip. And in a very short while there wasn’t a single living thing left in the cage!” (1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking, p. 359) As humorous as this little piece by Mark Twain is, it is also sadly quite reflective of our world.

I know I am not alone in my assessment that something disturbing and quite sinister is building in our world. Tensions created by differences among people have always been present, but it seems those who promote bias, hatred, and xenophobia are becoming bolder. How else do you explain the growing power of far-right political parties in Europe, and the racial discrimination being exercised by the American government in the guise of national security?

Canada is not innocent in all of this. Saudi Arabia is one of the worst offenders of human rights on the planet. Its lack of equality for women is well known, but what is often forgotten is the Saudi’s persecution of religious minorities including other Muslim sects. Last year our government approved the delivery of 1,000 light armoured military vehicles at a cost of 15 billion to the Saudis.

In the meantime, the Saudis began years ago, a bombing campaign in Yemen that has killed 10,000 people, and left 3 million more acutely malnourished, out of which 450,000 children are at risk of dying from malnourishment and diarrhea. 7 million people in Yemen never know when their next meal will come. And this is just one example of sectarian driven violence that occurs every day in this messed up world.

When this passage from John 4 came up in our service schedule, I could have taken many different tracts as a preaching theme. But then I realized that before us today, is Jesus’ approach to ethnic and religious differences. When confronting isolationist policies, and feeling fearful of those who espouse different ideas and beliefs than we do, we have in John 4 the answer to the question of “what would Jesus do”.

And what Jesus does in John four, rocked his disciples to the core, challenged contemporary Jewish religious leaders, and walked head long into an ancient cultural conflict. It all began when we read that Jesus wanted to go back to his home territory of Galilee from Judea, and decided to take the most direct route. In other words, to go through Samaria. Let’s stop right there. Jesus and his disciples went through Samaria. Samaria? No good Jew in Jesus’ day would ever willingly go into Samaria.

Sunday March 12th, 2023

Lent III

Traveling from Judea to Galilee, or the other way around, Jews would almost always detour around Samaria. Although Jews and Samaritans shared many beliefs, and much of the same ancient history, they despised each other. Remember the famous parable we call “The Good Samaritan”? Anyone hearing that story the day Jesus told it, would be confused, and probably offended, that the Samaritan was the one portrayed as the pious person, the kind person.

It seems odd, because of the Jews and Samaritan’s shared history, but as hated as Romans were, some Romans actually were accepted into the Jewish society. The Roman centurion who had the sick servant in Matthew 8 is one such example. Samaritans however, were considered an embarrassment. Jews didn’t just want Samaritans out of sight, they wanted them wiped from the earth. So, again I point out how shocking Jesus’ trip is through Samaria.

The disciples would have had knots in their stomachs that intensified with each step further into the territory. Then Jesus causes further embarrassment for the disciples, by stopping at Jacob’s well, and talking to a Samaritan woman. It was bad enough to walk through this territory but to actually stop to talk to someone, and a woman at that. So, one wonders, why were the Samaritans, who still exist today as a group of people of about 650, hated so much by Jews.

Well, the woman at the well points us to the heart of the matter when she says to Jesus who she knows is a Jew. (A rare sight in her village to be sure.) “Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?” Jacob was of course renamed Israel, and his twelve sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. The Samaritans were named after a famous city in the Old Testament called Samaria. It was the capital of the northern half of the Jewish divided kingdom.

Samaritans generally believed they were descendants of Joseph and Levi, while those in the southern kingdom of Judea, considered themselves descendants of Judah, Benjamin, or Levi. Even though both kingdoms came from the same forefather Jacob, scholars know that several cultural and religious differences existed between the two groups. Even when David ruled the united kingdoms, Samaria was a thorn in his side.

Rebellion and civil war often grew out of Samaria. The Assyrians for their part, spent 20 years conquering Israel, and when it was finally conquered, all the land was lost, except Samaria and surrounding area. The Assyrians also took many people into captivity, and replaced them with other foreign groups. These new people assimilated into Israel. When Judah was in captivity in Babylon, Samaritans built a new temple on Mt. Gerizim where they worshiped God.

When the Judeans returned to Jerusalem, as recorded in Nehemiah, they rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, a long bitter fight ensued as to which temple was the right one. So, we have two groups that read the Torah, and worship God, but they did not share a recent history around Jesus’ time, nor did they worship in the same place. Their fight really was not about their religious differences, but rather about who were the true descendants of Jacob.

Near the end of the second century BC, the Jews destroyed the temple on Mt. Gerizim, led by the Maccabean ruler John Hyrcanus, and he also conquered the Samaritans. So, when Jesus walks into the village of Sychar, and sits at that well, he has walked into the bitterness, and hundreds of years of hatred and prejudice.

Sunday March 12th, 2023
Lent III

When Jesus asks the woman for a drink of water, she is shocked and a bit indignant. “Why would a Jew ask a Samaritan for anything let alone some water?”

On the basis of the fact that Jesus, and this woman, are from differing factions of religious life, and she is an unaccompanied woman, should have been enough to prevent any interaction between them. But Jesus is not done revealing taboos. Knowing full well the woman’s life situation he tells her to go and call her husband, and come back, because culturally she should not talk with Jesus without a male relative present, but Jesus wants to acknowledge something.

She replies that she has no husband, and Jesus states that she has answered correctly and has actually had five husbands, and currently was with a man who wasn’t her husband. Jesus has revealed her secret, and also shone a light on another reason Jesus should never have talked to her. She is a social outcast. Why else does she come to the well alone and at noon?

Water was collected in the early morning when it was cool, and women would go at the same time to socialize and swap news. The woman Jesus meets, is a social pariah. She is shunned. She was likely the topic of much of the conversation around the well. Hers was a hard life. By all definitions she was, in the Jewish mind, unworthy of attention. Hence the reaction of the disciples in verse 27. They were astonished he was talking to this woman.

The revelation of her life’s situation floors the woman who discerns that Jesus is a prophet, but then Jesus does something he rarely does. Often in the gospels, Jesus asks the people he heals to not tell anyone about what happened to them. He also uses the term “Son of Man”, instead of “Son of God”. But here to a Samaritan woman, Jesus clearly identifies himself as the Messiah. The one who both Jews and Samaritans have been waiting for.

The woman runs off and tells her fellow villagers about Jesus, that he could be the Messiah. The people rush out, and we have this beautiful scene of Jesus seeing the villages coming to him and he declares, “Look how the fields are ripe for harvest.” Jesus then stays two days and teaches them and many came to faith. This whole story tells us something about the nature of the Gospel and Jesus himself.

Jesus knowingly and willingly, goes into the heart of Samaria among the people hated by his own people. This hatred was ingrained in his culture. Jesus also goes to a woman who would have been cast aside by pious Jews as irredeemable. As lost and beyond all hope. This passage reminds me that the message of God’s love and salvation is never limited by our own prejudices. Jesus revealed himself to a woman whose past we would not easily accept.

It also tells me that any argument about which group possesses the place where God is truly worshipped is meaningless. Jesus offers a grace that transcends the things that divide us. May I dare go so far, as to suggest that God is offended by our ever thinking that any other person is unworthy of God’s love and forgiveness. It is presumptuous for us to think we have the authority to ever determine to whom God extends his love.

C. S. Lewis once wrote of the scandal of grace. In commenting on John four he stated that the offer of salvation to the Samaritan was offensive to Jesus’ disciples.

Sunday March 12th, 2023

Lent III

No Christian teaching is more offensive to our sense of fairness than forgiveness. Grace is given to those who need it; friend and enemy alike. God is all about tearing down walls and making enemies into good neighbours.

Unfortunately, our world is very slow to adopt this same posture and frankly, even we followers of Christ struggle to implement fully the grace God wants to extend to this world. There are ample examples of the absurdity of what we think are critical differences. I came across one such absurdity that involved a famous Movie personality.

It would seem that the daughter of comedian Groucho Marx was once denied admittance to an exclusive country club swimming pool with her friends because she and her family were not members. Realizing what had happened, embarrassed officials sent the Marx family an apology and an application to join. Groucho declined the invitation with the comment, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member."

Someone still tried to smooth over the incident by persuading the comedian to allow an application to be submitted for membership. The country club was embarrassed further when the application was denied. The reason? The Marx family was Jewish and the club was "restricted." True to form, Groucho wrote back: "My wife is not Jewish. Can she go swimming and let our daughter wade up to her waist?"

But how is it any less absurd to arbitrarily ban whole groups of people from country clubs, communities, neighbourhoods, churches or countries based on things we cannot control about ourselves, like our ethnicity, or whether we worship in that church, or that mosque, or that synagogue. When it comes to dispensing grace, Jesus cares not one wit about the history of your people, or even your own personal history.

All he cares about is whether or not you are thirsty. Or more clearly, do you understand what you are thirsty for. All people thirst for something that will last. Something that will continually renew us. We are all like the woman at the well. "Sir, give me some of this water". The whole world is screaming to slake its thirst. The whole world is screaming to experience some hope and instead of offering the refreshing hope we have; we categorize and exclude folks.

And our exclusion often only punishes us. I have been fascinated and hopeful for Syrian refugees, especially as I read an amazing story in The Toronto Star (March 14th, 2017) about Tareq Hadad who opened a chocolate shop in Halifax called "Peace by Chocolate". Ever since the Prime Minister mentioned the business at the United Nations last year, the Hadhad's cannot keep up with the orders for their confections.

Hadhad speaks of the culture shock of moving to Nova Scotia after three years in a refugee camp in Lebanon. He says that the local people were so welcoming, and he wanted to give back to the community by doing what he was trained to do, make chocolates. He even sent profits last year to help victims of the Fort McMurray fire. Hadhad states that he hopes his experience shows that when we accept new comers "everybody wins".

Sunday March 12th, 2023

Lent III

What a wonderful story except for one thing. “Peace by Chocolate” isn’t here in Simcoe. Good things happen when we set aside anything that seeks to separate people. Remember the powerful image created in this passage. The disciples are trying to get Jesus to eat something, but Jesus is focused on the work he was sent to do. This interchange occurs as the people of Sychar are streaming out of their homes to meet Jesus at the well.

Jesus says, “Do not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.”

This is not a parable. He is saying literally, look and see the people coming to Jesus. What do we see when we see the people of our town? What goes through our minds and hearts when we see heart breaking pictures of desperate people using flimsy rubber boats, or walking hundreds of miles, all looking for some hope. It doesn’t matter that they speak another language, or they come from a different country, or even if they have a different religion. They are all ripe for the harvest.

They are all thirsting for someone, anyone, to offer them a cold drink, some hope. Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks of this water (meaning H₂O) will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” What could be more needful than that in every heart, in every single human being?

It is time to offer this thirsty world the only source of true water that can quench their souls.