

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

March 27, 2011

The Rev. Catherine Powell

Scripture: John 4:1-42, Encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well

“My song is love unknown, my Savior’s love for me, love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be.” Our opening hymn beautifully sums up the message of today’s gospel. But let me start with two stories.

The first took place when I was in a discussion at seminary. We were asked to tell the group a little about ourselves. A man who was one of the quietest members of our small class began to speak. He was a burly guy, about 30, African-American. His skin was a deep black and he had a scar running from his hairline down onto his forehead. He told us that he was from DC, married, with 2 little children, that he had always wanted to be a pastor. But then he took it to the next level. He told us what it felt like to walk the world in his shoes, or should I say, in his skin.

People crossed the street when they saw him coming—because he was black and big and had that scar. This happened to him every day. Women saw him and clutched their hand bags and picked up their pace. People wouldn’t make eye contact. He was a gentle man, but because of the categories people put him in, he walked through this world unseen in a way. People saw *someone* when they looked at him, someone threatening and scary. They didn’t see *him*—and that wore him down and broke his heart.

The second story comes from some years later, when I was serving as Vicar of the little cinderblock church in Fuquay-Varina. There was a grandmother there, a quiet woman who took care of a passel of grandchildren with her daughter. One Sunday, we baptized her newest grandchild and I had seen her crying during the service.

I asked her about it later and she told me her story. She was an Indian—a Native American— and she had grown up on the edge of a reservation. She had grown up bullied and insulted because she was an Indian. She had been called terrible names and humiliated many times. She had survived, come east and married. Now the daughter who lived with her had 4 racially mixed children—Indian, white, and black—and she felt for them keenly. She worried about whether they would be accepted by any group, especially in a rural community. She remembered her own pain. But that was not what had made her cry. What made her cry was happiness. It was seeing the little, loving church community gathered around her daughter’s family and especially that new baby girl. It was seeing them cooing and beaming and loving that child. What made her cry was hearing the child’s true name—not the cruel names of the grandmother’s past—but her Christian name, proclaimed at her baptism. And hearing those powerful words said to the little girl: “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.” In Christ, that child had an identity. In that church her family always had a place of love and respect. The little girl would be treasured. The water of baptism marked it. And the relief and joy of that made her cry.

Today’s Gospel is about a woman who may never have been treasured. But when she comes to the well, Jesus speaks to her. He speaks to her: a woman, to her: an unacceptable mixed-race, mixed religion Samaritan woman. Not only does he speak, he asks something of her, something that *she* can give that he truly needs. “Will you get me a drink of water?” In a way, he makes himself the vulnerable one.

She expresses her surprise at all this, and we can almost see him now looking at her very carefully. “Perhaps,” he notices, “*she* is in more need than I am. Hers is the pressing thirst.”

He says—compassionately, I imagine, “Maybe *you* should ask *me* and I will get you living water.”

Just as in the encounter with Nicodemus which we heard last week, Jesus uses a pun. “Living water” means flowing water—like the water in our baptismal font—or it can imply “the water of life.” The woman says she’d like some living water—but how can Jesus give this?

“Go get your husband, and I’ll explain it to the two of you.”

“I don’t have a husband.”

“That’s true. You have had five, but the man you live with now is not your husband.”

At this point, commentators in the past have done what the world often does; they have done what Jesus is showing us *not* to do. They have assumed the worst. They have assumed that the woman is immoral, a “loose woman.” But there is no real evidence for that. Jesus does not rebuke her at any point, no “go and sin no more.” It is just as likely, maybe more likely, that she has experienced tragedy or abuse. Perhaps she has been abandoned; perhaps she has watched husbands fall ill and die. However we interpret the “five husbands,” we see her life has not been smooth and easy. Yet Jesus’s tone apparently does not condemn. It invites her to more conversation.

“I see,” she says, “that you are a prophet.”

And then she moves into theological discussion with him. She can discuss something important with him. He sees her. He listens. He takes her seriously. And she becomes not just a woman or just a Samaritan but a disciple. And she wants other people to see this man, like her to have the chance to be seen, to be treated with dignity, and thus transformed. She drops her jar and runs back to the village.

Jesus looks past roles and categories. Jesus looks beyond a person’s past. He sees beyond clothes or skin color or education. And it is that very looking and seeing, that very respectful attentiveness, that willingness to engage that transforms those whom he encounters. He breaks through doubts and sorrows and reserve because that thoughtful affirmation, that expression of love, is the living water. The young man in seminary longed for it, and found it in Jesus. The grandmother in Fuquay rejoiced in it.

We know the transforming power of being seen and being treated with respect and compassion. And, thank God, this community follows Christ well in this regard. John Mott said about Church of the Servant, “They’ll take *anybody*.”

We’re not perfect but day by day, person by person, we try to share that living water by honoring the precious status of each of God’s children. We take them by the hand in the Peace, we offer them the holy water of baptism—to be named and claimed and washed clean, and at communion we invite them up to the welcome table. All in the name of the one who is the water of life.