



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson, Rector
Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent
St. Mark's on the Campus
February 24, 2008

Our gospel passage this morning isn't just long; it also has a lot going on within it. Part of what's going on, of course, is the tension between the Samaritans and the Jews, two religious groups, two ethnic groups, two political groups that don't have an especially good history with each other.

Maybe you heard the story on NPR this week about groups of women meeting in the Middle East. These groups are comprised of women whose children have died on one side or the other of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. One woman commented that although the cultural and political and religious differences still exist among them, these mothers find that their common tragedy of losing a child to whom they gave life brings them together as one. Their common humanity - as it's revealed in a shared tragedy - provides a bridge to one another over what in other contexts and to other people seems an insurmountable gulf. *Together* they find new life buried in the reality of the death of a child.

Maybe something like that happened with Jesus' followers after he died, too. Maybe the shared tragedy of losing Jesus had a similar effect on the various factions that followed Jesus and argued about who was the greatest of all. Maybe one of the ways the resurrection manifests itself is in the reality that people with profound differences can come together and find new and unexpected life in a shared humanity before God. Fragile and scarred and broken as our humanity is, when we recognize that we share it in common with each other - especially when we recognize that God shares in it, too - life can absorb our pain, though the scars remain.

Surely that's part of the hope of the cross. Turning our eyes together to Jesus - to his cross and to the life we share because of Him - ought to reduce conflict to its proper perspective, reminding us that we're all on the same side, the only side that really exists.

Another way of putting it is to say that, although Jews and Samaritans think they “don’t share anything in common” -- to use those words from the gospel reading -- like those Palestinian and Jewish women who have all lost children, they share more in this life than they might wish they did. They share the reality of loving and of being loved in return, by children, by spouses, parents, friends, others in their community of faith. They share the reality of hugging and of being hugged back. Of life and of tragic death. They share Mary’s reality at the cross of her son Jesus.

Jesus is very much at the center of this gospel passage this morning. Because of him, these enemies who don’t have anything to do with each other -- who don’t even want to share water when they run into one another in the heat of the midday desert sun – these Samaritans invite Jesus and his followers to stay with them for a couple of days, and this little group of traveling Jews chooses to stay.

When Jesus is *sought after*, when Jesus is *followed*, when Jesus is *listened to*, he brings together what has been divided. Dividing walls of hostility, bricked and mortared – sometimes re-mortared over generations in order to keep them strong – walls that keep us from being vulnerable to the fullness of one another’s humanity – those walls collapse when we are clinging to the cross because our hands are too full participating in Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation to pick up more bricks and mortar. Our hands and our hearts are occupied instead with bringing life.

Maybe that’s the choice continually before us: pick up bricks to build walls or pick up the cross and help to bring walls tumbling to the ground. But we can’t make that choice on our own. “You know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves,” our collect for this morning says. We each have to be willing to listen for the word Jesus has for us. The woman at the well has a bit of difficulty with that at first, doesn’t she?

You want *ME* to give you a drink of water? Me a Samaritan and you a Jew? And *you* plan on giving *me* living water? How are you going to manage that? You don’t even have a bucket! And if you can manage it, hey, if you can give me water that gushes up inside of me all the time, how cool is that?! It would save me a lot of work! In fact, frankly, it sounds a bit too good to be true!

I don’t think we can blame her skepticism really, can we? Haven’t we all shared it now and then? I don’t think most of us consciously think that the good news is too good to be true most of the time, but if we’re honest we all *act* that way now and then. Remember that old saying, “God helps those who help themselves?” Is that an expression of the cross of the one we follow?

But don't we all in one way or another rely on ourselves a little too much now and then, rather than looking for the guidance of God? And how often have we been tempted to say or to think about a given situation, "Well, we have to live in the real world, don't we?" Those words are too often a temptation to justify trusting in our own might or our own wisdom or our own money rather than trusting in the power of Jesus' cross, the love that, to use St. Paul's words, appears foolish and weak to those who don't trust it.

We can all come up with reasons to set aside the cross for a time; we all have. It's more practical. It's more convenient. It will cost less. You can come up with your own; those are some of the ones I've used. The tricky thing is, those statements are usually true. The cross is less convenient, less practical, and it does cost more. That's the way the world in which we live has been put together.

I suspect that was part of what was going on that awful night when Jesus was struggling in the Garden of Gethsemane, with sweat dripping from his face like the blood that later would fall from that same forehead. He knew in his bones where he was being called and yet how could the cross be a place of God's love and God's grace? How could it be? Should he follow where he was apparently being led? Deep inside him that night Jesus had the conversation we all must have. Jesus had it until he was able to pick up his cross and lead the way for the rest of us. The way toward the fullness of God's grace.

I don't think it's possible in this human life for any of us to reach those places of most profound grace without our own Gethsemanes, without those times of difficult conversations – sweat dripping conversations -- with God. If Jesus had to spend a sleepless night struggling to move into a place of deep trust, we probably shouldn't be surprised that we have to struggle occasionally, too. We might hear some things in those conversations that seem at first to be rather outlandish.

I provide living water, Jesus tells the woman at the well. Eventually she came to drink from that unending stream, and she transformed the community in which she lived by pointing others in Jesus' direction. Together they all find in Him a new life, a new community, a community which included those on the other side of the walls that had been so rigidly built over time.

I wonder how difficult it was for her to go back and tell her friends that there was a *Jew* out by the well who was very special, very different – who knew her at least as well as she knew herself, and whose knowledge was a gift to this Samaritan. That must have cost her something.

I have food you know nothing about, Jesus tells his disciples. Baskets and baskets of food that overflow without stopping; baskets whose depths have no bottom. They don't know quite what he's talking about, but eventually they come to understand that all any of us have to do is to reach out for that food and we find ourselves being filled over and over again. With so much left over that we can bring as many as we can find to feast with us. Even those with whom we'd really rather not share a glass of water. "It is no longer because of what *you* said that we believe," the woman's friends tell her. "We have heard *for ourselves*, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

It's important for us all to spend time with Jesus like this group of Samaritans did, having our own conversations, asking Jesus to stay as long as it takes to turn our hearts. Those conversations will draw us into new places. Places in which our hearts are too full of the cross to harbor anger and doubt and grudges and guilt and all those other emotions that divide us from one another and deny our shared humanity – a humanity that is fragile, a humanity that needs above all to trust more deeply that we *all* are children of God -- even those we'd most like to be rid of – and who like to be rid of us.

We'll hear in those conversations with Jesus some things that we don't expect. He'll help us to see things in new ways. His words will lead us to our own Gethsemanes and beyond those Gethsemanes to our own crosses where we have to trust in God more than we ever have had to trust before. And then beyond those crosses to a life that is eternal because God is at the center of it shining through.

We are led to that life by Jesus. As the letter to the Hebrews says, "Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast . . . For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace in time of need." (Hebrews 4: 14, 16)

Thanks Be to God.

Amen.