

Sunday, March 15, 2020
Third Sunday in Lent (Year A)
John 4.5-42
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Life-Changing Encounters in the Midst of Everyday Life”

Imagine going into your kitchen to get some water out of the tap—to drink, to put the kettle on for tea, to wash some dishes. And there, sitting on the cabinet next to the sink is a strange man. Not just any stranger, but none other than Jesus. That’s essentially what happens with the Samaritan woman at the well in today’s Gospel reading. Back then, they didn’t have indoor plumbing, so the women had to go to the communal well every day to draw water for the necessary household chores—cooking, washing, cleaning. When this particular woman went to perform her daily chore of drawing water, she came across Jesus, sitting there resting. And the exchange that occurred between the two changed her life. Little did she know when she got up that morning, when she set out to go to the well to perform the back-breaking task before her, that she would leave that well, not with her water jar filled with plain old water, but with her soul filled with living water.

We don’t know a whole lot about the woman. We don’t even know her name. All we really know about her is contained in these 37 verses of John’s Gospel. And much of that we have to infer from the context of the encounter and by reading between the lines of the dialogue presented.

We obviously know that she was a Samaritan. Samaritans were, actually are, an ethnic and religious group closely related to Jews, being descended from two of the original Twelve Tribes of Israel. Somewhere along the line, the Samaritans and the rest of Israel diverged socially and religiously, with each claiming the other were the ones who split off from their shared history and tradition. As a result, there was a great deal of animosity between the two groups. Jews and Samaritans did not get along, viewing the other as heretics. The fact that Jesus, a Jew, would willingly talk to the woman, a Samaritan, was nothing short of remarkable. Hence the woman’s comment to Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jn 4.9). Then combine that with the fact that she was a woman. Jewish men, and particularly rabbis, did not engage in unsupervised conversation with women they were not related to, let alone women who were not Jewish. Double whammy!

But wait, there’s more. We learn from the conversation between the two that the woman has had five husbands and the man she is living with now is not even her husband. That kind of calls into question the woman’s morality. Now the five former husbands could possibly be explained. They might have died, or they might have divorced her. A man could get tired of his wife and want a newer model, and all he had to do was say that they were no longer married. So the fact that she had been married five times previously was not necessarily a black mark on her record. Particularly not in a society where women relied on having a husband to take care of them. But the fact that she was shacking up with another man, her sixth (that we know of), would have called her moral character into question. A woman just did not live with a man without benefit of marriage.

What further supports the likelihood that this woman was, shall we say, loose, is the fact that she came to the well in the middle of the day, during the hottest part of the day. Typically, women went to draw water early in the morning, when it was cool. And the women in a village would typically go together. It was a chance for them not only to get water for the day, but also to visit and gossip with each other. The fact that our heroine went to the well alone later in the day is likely due to the fact that she was not welcomed by the other women of the village. That she herself was probably the subject of gossip because of her questionable living arrangement.

So, Samaritan woman with a questionable moral character. Three strikes! And yet, despite all this, Jesus talks with her. He is the one who breaks all social conventions of the day by initiating the conversation. Not only that, this is the longest documented conversation Jesus has in the Gospels. For such a dialogue to occur between Jesus and such a person was nothing short of remarkable.

The content of the dialogue that occurs between them is no less remarkable. In some ways, it is reminiscent of the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus that we heard in last week's Gospel reading. When the woman marvels that Jesus would ask her for a drink of water, he responds, "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" (Jn 4.10). Like Nicodemus before her, she takes Jesus' comments literally, thinking Jesus is offering another source of plain old H₂O. For the term "living water" could literally mean "spring water" as opposed to water from a well or cistern. Water that would have been easier to obtain.

Jesus corrects the woman's misunderstanding: "Everyone who drinks of this water 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" (Jn 4.13-14). Still not quite getting what Jesus is saying, he then moves on to the subject of the status of the woman's domestic arrangement. The woman begins to realize Jesus is a prophet, which leads to conversation about their religious differences. When Jesus begins talking about true worship of God being in spirit and truth, the woman confesses that she believes that the Messiah will come, bringing all this to pass. At which point Jesus reveals, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (Jn 4.26).

With this revelation, the woman goes back to her village and tells all her neighbors—those who look down upon her—that she has met the Messiah. For whatever reason—perhaps because of her earnestness—they believe her testimony and go out to meet Jesus for themselves, and ask him to stay and teach them the truth. A truth that transcends their Samaritan beliefs, and that even transcends Jesus' Jewish tradition.

This is a story of an unexpected encounter with the divine, and a story of transformation that results from that encounter. The woman has an unexpected encounter with Jesus and, despite who she is—despite her questionable reputation—is transformed. She is able to rise above the stigma that has been placed upon her by her fellow villagers and find her true voice. The voice of one who proclaims the Gospel. One who proclaims Jesus as Messiah. And she is able to do it in an authentic way precisely because of who she was, as one on the margins of society and

who has nothing to lose. One who, through Jesus, has received living water that cleansed her and transformed her. And the people of Sychar are similarly transformed by their willingness to be open to hearing the truth spoken from an unexpected source—from a presumably adulterous woman proclaiming the message of one who otherwise would be viewed as enemy.

That's the last we hear of the Samaritan woman. But the Orthodox Church did not forget her. According to their tradition, after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, the woman was baptized by the Apostles themselves and given the name Photini, which means "enlightened one." Because she was enlightened by her encounter with Jesus at the well. She eventually made her way to Carthage in Northern Africa where she proclaimed the Gospel and converted many to Christianity. She was arrested by the Roman authorities and taken to Rome, where she was imprisoned. Even in prison, she continued preaching the Gospel and baptizing converts to the faith. Despite many tortures and repeated attempts by Emperor Nero to silence her, she continued her work for Christ. Ironically, Nero eventually had Photini thrown down a well, where she surrendered her soul to God.

St. Photini continues to be one of the important saints in the Orthodox calendar and is recognized as "Equal-to-the-Apostles"—one whose work greatly built up the Church.

This season, we have been reflecting a lot on how Lent is a time of seeking deeper and more authentic relationship with God. And particularly about how we can experience God in new and unexpected ways, in unexpected places. The story of Photini helps us to see how this can and does happen. How one morning, on a day like any other day, she got up, facing the prospect of the day's chores. How she went out to the well in the heat of the day, like so many days before, with the simple goal of drawing water. Instead of getting the water that she expected, she had an unexpected encounter. There, in the midst of her everyday life doing her everyday chores, she happened to meet Jesus. An encounter that changed her life. Instead of getting the water she went after, she received living water. The water of eternal life. Water that transformed her in profound ways, changing her life forever. And not only her life, but those of her neighbors, as well. And if we are to believe the Orthodox stories, changed the lives of countless other people.

That is what Lent is about. Being open to encountering Jesus in the midst of our everyday lives. In unexpected places. In unexpected ways. And if we are open to such encounters, if we are open to receiving the gift of living water that is offered to us through our unexpected encounters with the divine, we, too, are transformed. Forever changed. And not just us. Transformed by our encounters with the divine, we just might change the lives of others we encounter along the way.

And maybe that is what we need to keep in mind during these challenging times in which we find ourselves. To be open to where we might experience a moment of grace, an encounter with something beyond ourselves, even in such places as shelf-bare grocery stores. Or how we might be a moment of grace to others.

Next time you go to get water out of the sink, or do some other seemingly mundane, everyday task, watch out. You never know who you might encounter, what might happen, or how it could change your life.