

When Jesus Sees
John 4.5-42
March 19, 2017
Lent 3A
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For about three weeks, I've been exploring the Lightness of Lent—the idea that Lent isn't simply a season of giving up a favorite or tempting something in order to feel the longing of doing without but rather a time of letting go of what limits the fullness of your life. The quote I've kept on my desk to guide me through this season reminds me:

"Maybe the journey isn't so much about becoming anything. Maybe it's about unbecoming everything that isn't really you, so you can be who you were meant to be in the first place." Summer Saldana

My personal practices this year are leaving my iPhone in my purse at home (which I am only successfully doing maybe 50% of the time) and cooking real meals as a family instead of eating in restaurants (which we are successfully doing about 90% of the time). The iPhone practice, at which I confess I am struggling, calls me to be more present, more aware of the key relationships right in front of me, less distracted by the images and ideas floating through wifi that, quite honestly, contribute to a restlessness in my life and not an abundant wholeness. The eating practice is also a type of presence—the slowness of preparing a meal, the intention of shopping and chopping, the attention and care for eating foods around our family table that nourish us.

One is a feeble attempt to give up, the other a positive effort at taking on, and both are practices in seeing. See what is good and possible. See what is unhealthy and needs adjusting. See who is before you and alongside you. See yourself, see what you've been missing by allowing yourself to hurriedly sleepwalk through your days. As John will tell us in chapter 10 of his gospel: see the life that is really life, and have it to the full.

We have four more weeks of this season, and I hope you will commit or recommit to a practice today. Whether you've let something go, taken something on, or not given it much thought, you can start today and commit to the journey of unburdening, lightening, and seeing real life for the next 28 days. And we do so knowing others are walking this journey, too. Catholic blogger, Albert Little, writes about the lenten practice of releasing grudges, and writer Peggy Rosenthal reflects on the hard work of

forgiving ones enemies. Maybe in these stories you will hear inspiration and strength for your own.

Concerning the myriad hurts and slights we all carry, Little confesses:

On Lent and Letting Go of Grudges, K. Albert Little¹

I held a grudge.

I don't think I've *dragged it around* all these intervening years. I certainly haven't let it fester, or focused on it, or harboured it with any real intention. It was like one of those things in the bottom of a drawer that you know is there and that you might, someday, need to retrieve and use but, more likely than not, you'll forget about it and never give it a second thought. Or, maybe, when it comes time to move home and you're packing up it falls out, onto the floor, and *there it is*.

There is that grudge. I recently saw something this person had written, indirectly to a friend of a friend. It was the first time I'd seen or heard anything from this person in probably a decade and there was that immediate pang of anger, and hurt. There it was, immediately, that grudge. A decade old, or more. And I realized, this person probably doesn't even remember me. This person probably doesn't even remember what they did. This person probably has no idea the impact of their actions.

Anne Lamott has a great quote that is, to her credit, often mistakenly attributed to the Buddha. She says, "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die."

That's my grudge. *That's it*.

Lent, being a traditional time of penance, forgiveness, and repentance, is the perfect time to practice letting go. It's the perfect time to let go of my grudge.

Because the rat isn't going to die if I drink the poison. The past won't change, hearts won't be healed, youthful mistakes won't be corrected by my being bitter, and holding my grudge. The heart that can find healing is my own. This Lent, I will forgive, and practice the art of forgiveness. I will prayerfully become that much more like Christ, and practice the art of Christ-likeness. I will let go, and I will receive.

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/albertlittle/on-lent-and-letting-go-of-grudges/>

Reflecting on the presidential election one year ago and the way we divided Americans see the "other" side (true for most of us, regardless of side), Rosenthal writes:

Love Your Enemies for Lent, Peggy Rosenthal²

For years, during every Lent that coincides with a presidential campaign, my Lenten project has been to try to "love my enemies." Enemies in this case are the politicians whose views and words disgust me. Terrify me. Yet I know that these people are all children of God.

In years past, I've failed in this Lenten practice. My self-righteousness and judgmental nature have gotten the better of me. But I'm trying yet again, because I'm convinced that this practice can be good for my soul. Lent is always a fresh opportunity to come closer to God, to become more like the person God wants me to be.

God loves every single person equally. I truly believe this; or I profess that I do. God doesn't play favorites in the human family.

And how about my own sinfulness? God loves me despite it. Or even, Pope Francis might say, *because of it*—because my sinfulness gives God the opportunity to embrace me in mercy.

Surely I'm no less a sinner than Pope Francis declares himself to be! Listen to him in the new book of interviews *The Name of God is Mercy*. "I have a special relationship with people in prisons, deprived of their freedom. I have always been very attached to them, precisely because of my awareness of being a sinner. Every time I go through the gates into a prison to celebrate Mass or for a visit, I always think: Why them and not me? I should be here. I deserve to be here. Their [life] could have been mine."

Reading this, I praise God with gratitude for the genuine humility of this pope. Still ...I think I'd find it easier to love prisoners than to love politicians. What is it about our national political culture that seems to bring out the worst in nearly every public figure?...can I see God embracing each of them in love?

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/goodletters/2016/02/love-your-enemies-for-lent/>

Pope Francis can. In this book he describes God's mercy as like "a great light of love and tenderness because God forgives not with a decree, but with a caress." Here am I, issuing decrees to politicians...while God is "caressing the wounds of our sin."

"How in practice," I muse with my husband, "can we watch these candidates or read about them in the news without mumbling with disgust under our breath? Shall we consciously say a prayer before each of these 'encounters'—a prayer something like: 'Gracious God of mercy and love, help me see each of these people as you see them. Forgive me my own sins. Amen.'"

If I offer this prayer with every political encounter, what will happen in my heart as I then listen to the candidates' words and watch their gestures? Will my heart soften toward them? I hope so. I pray so.

And given how deeply divided we are right now as a nation and how tremendously difficult it is for us to hear one another, even when we are dear friends or close family, what might happen before each encounter if we consciously pray, "Gracious God of mercy and love, help me see each of these people as you see them."

If we want to be the kind of people who really see, see our own lives, the lives of the people we love, the lives of the strangers we meet, then we must be people who are guided by the love of God. And there is no better example for us of what this kind of living looks like than in the life example of Jesus. In John's gospel today we hear Jesus is on a journey with his disciples and stops at a well in the middle of the day, in a town that people like him didn't frequent because it was a town of "others" to be avoided. Like the caste system dividing Hindus in India or the railroad tracks dividing one part of town from another, Samaria and its descendants were marked by 1st century Jews as unclean; a place and a people to be fully avoided. All that to say, the business of people attempting to protect themselves from the perceived threats of those marked as foreign is not new. What is noteworthy is the fact that Jesus walks across the dividing line, directly into the territory marked forbidden, and he plants himself at the gathering place of the town Sychar, and there he met a woman.

Now for much of scripture, a man and a woman meeting at a well like this would signal an upcoming engagement; somehow these two characters are about to be bound together in a way that God uniquely binds two lives and makes them one. John alone tells this story, and he sets the stage so his listeners are entirely thrown off from the first words. A Jew, a Samaritan, a drink of water at a well—the original hearers of this text

would have immediately recognized the dissonance of the text and begun listening intently for the twist.

He asks the woman for a drink, and they engage in a lively conversation. She challenges him. She asks questions about his Jewish faith. He engages her and responds to her challenges with his own perspective. As a congregation that believes in the value and full equality of women, this isn't news to us. Do your best to hear how radical the scene is. Listen for all of the boundaries Jesus is rapidly crossing. Samaria. Samaritan. Woman. And not just woman, but a woman who draws water alone at the hottest part of the day—not with the other women in the cool of the morning or late afternoon—a woman who has somehow been abandoned by divorce or by death from numerous men and now only has the protection of the man in whose whom she currently lives. There are plenty of stories in which Jesus names someone's sin and frees them to "go and sin no more." This isn't one of those. Jesus knows she is at the fringe of this community and that her existence is delicate. Samaria. Samaritan. Woman. Fringe.

And he engages her as an equal. He listens to her, hears her, debates theology with her, names their shared heritage in stories of scripture, and offers her a fullness of life through their exchange because he has shattered the arbitrary boundaries that divide them and fully seen her. The twist with Jesus is that he sees things we don't see. More specifically, he sees people we overlook. And he sees friends and potential and expansive possibility where we see stranger and different and threat and enemy.

The great preacher and writer David Lose notes this capacity to see is central to John's gospel: "'Seeing'...it's crucial to note, is all-important. 'To see' is often connected with belief. When the woman says, 'I see you are a prophet,' she is making a confession of faith. Why? Because Jesus has 'seen' her. He has seen her plight — of dependence, not immorality. He has recognized her, spoken with her, offered her something of incomparable worth. He has seen her — she exists for him, has worth, value, significance and all of this is treatment to which she is unaccustomed. And so when he speaks of her past both knowingly and compassionately, she realizes she is in the presence of a prophet. For this reason only does she risk the central question that has divided Samaritans and Jews for centuries. This is no awkward dodge or academic diversion; this is a heartfelt question that gets to the core of what separates her from Jesus. And when Jesus surprises her with an answer that is simultaneously more hopeful and penetrating than she'd expected, she leaves her water jar behind to tell her neighbors about this man...this story is not about immorality; it's about identity."³

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/misogyny-moralism-and-the_b_836753.html

Jesus sees her, and her life is transformed. Jesus sees her, and his consciousness expands. Jesus sees her, and the boundaries of God's kingdom are made wider. This is the same work that is at stake in our lives in the big and small choices we make every day. God calls you to this work. The Holy Spirit makes possible the capacity to see life before you as it really is. Jesus the Christ, our brother and our guide, shows us the way and invites us onto the journey of faith. May we pray with earnest together: Gracious God of mercy and love, help us see each person we encounter as you see them. Open our eyes. Wake us up. Call us into the fullness of life that is really life as you have hoped and dreamed for us. Amen.