

Back to the Well
Sunday, March 23, 2014
John 4:5-42 (Lent 3A)
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One day last week I was listening to a recording of The Moth from New York Public Library, broadcast on public radio. It's a show that mixes thematic storytelling with live music, and the theme of that particular program was Stories of the Sacred. I caught the final 15 minutes in my car and sat outside the church, fascinated by the preacher, activist, storyteller. Only when I went to find the story online to listen a second time did I discover I had been listening to Reverend Al Sharpton as he and several others were asked, "What do you hold sacred?"

Sharpton is known for being opinionated, flamboyant, aligning himself with the oppressed in public cases of injustice—and often known for standing near the brightest spotlight. But on this radio broadcast, he spoke gently and shared his quiet struggle of living to his truest self.

As a child, Sharpton knew he would preach. At 9-yrs-old, he preached at the world's fair with a gospel choir around him. After he was done, a man from the choir came up to him and said, "You will one day come to preach out of conviction, not talent." Sharpton held onto that statement for decades, asking himself, "What is the difference between communicating out of conviction and communicating out of talent?"

Then in 1991, he was surprised with a life lesson that challenged his notions of seeking justice—justice seeking being his core values. A young, African-American man had been killed by a group of white men in Bensonhurst, NY, and groups had gathered to protest on both sides of the case. Police gathered to separate the throngs of people and to provide some protection as Sharpton's group gathered to march through Brooklyn. As Sharpton moved to the front of the crowd to lead the way, a drunk, young, white man jumped through the crowd and stabbed Sharpton in the chest. Police immediately rushed Sharpton to the hospital for surgery, and he was released within a week. The young man who assaulted him was arrested and charged with assault and attempted murder.

Some time later, Sharpton's mother asked him, "Whatever happened to the young man who stabbed you?" "Funny you should ask me that," replied Sharpton, "I just found out he's going to trial in two weeks." "Oh," his mother said, "are you going to forgive him?" Sharpton looked at his mother, "Forgive him? He tried to kill me!" "But I thought you were convicted that you wanted to be like Dr. King," said his mother. "I was." "Then what do you think he would do?" asked his mother. "I don't know," he said. "I was just asking," ended his mother.

Sharpton began to realize that the real drama of life and truth and figuring out who you are at your core begins after encounters that push us beyond the point of pithy phrases and comfortable interactions. For him, it was the dramatic moment of realizing he had been targeted for death. So he got up early on the morning of the trial and went to the courthouse and asked the judge to pardon his attempted killer. He realized he had shown up to court to speak on behalf of so many other people. He wanted to request the same leniency for his attacker that he sought for others.

The judge thanked Rev. Sharpton but went on to sentence the man to nine years in prison. Months later, a letter arrived for Rev. Sharpton from Michael Riccardi, the man who stabbed him that January day in Bensonhurst. Riccardi told Sharpton his story. He explained that he came from a troubled home with a violent, alcoholic father, and he had continued in his father's ways. Riccardi wrote, "It occurred to me sitting here in jail, no one ever stood up and spoke for me in my life until you walked in court and spoke for me. I wanted to thank you for speaking up for me. And I want to encourage you to keep speaking up for people no one would ever speak up for." After a few days, Sharpton wrote back, and the two began to exchange letters.

Sharpton re-read Riccardi's letters for a while, then two months later decided to go visit him in prison. He knew he needed to sit with the man who tried to take his life. Riccardi thanked him for coming and said Sharpton's forgiveness would allow him to move on to a new life after getting out of prison.

Sharpton admitted that he visited Riccardi for himself to find out if he was convicted or just talented. Was he preaching and living a message that he believed? Or was he just a good showman with a flair for words? "You never will know," Sharpton said, "until you are faced with something you don't control and that is not scripted."

That exchange solidified for Sharpton his purpose in life—speaking up for those whose voices and stories aren't heard; even if those people might wish to harm him. He recognized, "The pursuit of justice is only true if you're pursuing justice in yourself and with all of those around you."

This work of seeking the truth of who we are, who we were created to be, and evaluating how well we are living that out is the stuff of Lent. Are we living out of deep conviction, compelled to synch our lives with the Way of Jesus or do we just speak beautiful words that fall away when life goes off script?

Our Gospel lesson this morning is one of those scenes when Jesus does not follow the script. He leads his disciples into Samaria, beyond the borders acceptable to his faith, and there meets a woman who has come to draw water for the day.

Throughout the Gospels, Samaritans are often the foil to religious leaders and characters popularly held in high cultural esteem. John is giving us a clue that something significant is about to happen when Jesus crosses that geographical divide. "Samaritans were considered

heretics, foreigners” because of their theological differences. Yet Jesus “had to go through Samaria”, reports John.

It is in this encounter with a woman (not a man) of heretical and unclean background sitting beside Jacob’s well (usually the introductory setting in scripture for a betrothal story) that we find “Jesus’ longest recorded conversation” in the Gospels.¹ It’s not with disciples, his family, or esteemed religious leaders that Jesus is documented talking at length. It is with this unnamed woman in Samaria at Jacob’s well.

Preachers and students of scripture usually get bogged down at this point considering what the woman’s back story was. Who were these husbands? Why is she condemned to drawing water in the heat of the day? Is this allegory or history? These are interesting questions to ask and explore, but they don’t get at the heart of this narrative’s message.

This woman comes to the cultural center alone, at an unpopular time of day, and finds herself in a lengthy, lively conversation with Jesus not about sin and repentance but about who can worship God, where God can be worshiped, and how faith is to be lived out. At this well, a place of routine and the source of survival, her faith is made real and she comes to follow Jesus.

Frances Taylor Gench, in her study of women’s encounters with Jesus in the Gospels, notes some scholars see this scene as John’s “counterpart to the Synoptic presentation of male disciples leaving their nets and boats behind to follow Jesus.”² Whereas the men drop their nets without a word and join Jesus on his mission, this woman who is outside the accepted norms of Judaism and outside the accepted norms of her own culture, sits and questions Jesus at length about who he is, what he believes, and where “capital T” Truth can be found.

She serves a number of functions in this story. She represents the Samaritan people, a group who have not always worshiped the one, true God and now worship in a way and place far different from the Judaism practiced in first century Jerusalem. She is a challenge to Jesus’ disciples and testimony to who can carry God’s word to others. It is this woman who spreads the news of Jesus’ story and invites the city to come and encounter Jesus for themselves. Ultimately, she is a reminder to listeners that God’s kingdom is bigger than any of us imagines.

Of the early church listening to this Gospel narrative, Sandra Schneiders writes, “Jesus’ discourse about his mission and its extension into Samaria only serves to confirm their worst fears, that they are neither the originators nor the controllers of the Church’s mission.”³ The disciples are continually surprised by Jesus’ willingness to speak with this woman and to include her as a follower. Even though they trust him enough to follow him, they do not understand that

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well*, p. 110s

² Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well*, p. 118

³ Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well*, p. 119

he will always nudge them to stretch the limitations of their conviction. Just how deeply do they affirm his Way? How much do they trust God's generosity?

It is at the well that the woman is called and that the disciples are challenged. Through them we are reminded: We do not get to choose who is included in God's grace and welcomed at God's table. In this reading, we encounter Christ and the Other at the Well of God's fidelity, God's restorative rest, and God's eternal nourishment.

For a few months now, I have fielded questions from friends beyond this community who are watching us and listening to our story, from guests after our worship service, and from neighbors around town about who this congregation is. What do we value and what do we affirm? What kind of Baptists are we? How can a woman be the preacher here? Are we liberal? Yes. Are we conservative? Yes. Do we believe the same things about scripture and heaven and hell and Jesus' divinity and the way, the truth, and the life? Mmmmm...sometimes.

As I describe this diverse, loving, intelligent, opinionated, welcoming congregation and the breadth of world views and beliefs represented here, some inquirers scratch their heads and express their dissatisfaction with answers that are not black or white but rest comfortably, instead, in the spectrum of grey. "How can you all be so different? Does that actually work?" Mmmmm...sometimes. :)

But some others get it. They understand and are refreshed by hearing that we fiercely guard a common ground here in this place—where worship, community, and sharing life together in the Way of Christ is what we hold and cherish. Whether we articulate it this way or not, we are drawn back to the Well each week. Like the disciples and the Samaritan woman, we come from Jerusalem and Mt. Gerizim to this common place where we are challenged, we drink deeply from the living water we so desperately need, and we feel God's Spirit nudge us ever so gently to consider the limitations of our convictions.

When do we need to speak out for one who goes unheard? When do we need to forgive our enemies and welcome them as friends? What do we do when we continue to profess one faith with our lips and live another with our days?

Few encounters in our lives push us to answer these questions. For Sharpton it was facing a man who wished to kill him and then discovering that man's story. He became a person to know and forgive rather than an enemy to delight in punishing. If Sharpton's profession of faith was true, then he had no choice but to respond in love for this man.

In the news of the past week was the death of Fred Phelps on Wednesday. Phelps was the founder of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church known best for picketing funerals with messages of God's hate and condemnation. Since word spread of Phelps' move to hospice care and imminent death, people who fiercely disagree with his message have asked, "How does one respond to the death of a man whose life was known for a message of hate?" My friend Emily

Dunham, said of his death, “I do not have to like him, but I am bound to love him. I will say, ‘Rest in peace’ until I mean it.”

Because we are bound to the Way of love, we go back to the well. We go back to the well when we’re empty, when we need for God to restore us, when we need our story to be told to us so that we remember who we are.

We go back to the well when we have forgotten each other, when we need to be challenged by the breadth, and width, and height of God’s love, when we have forgotten that God’s grace covers all—even the people who may harm us, even the ones who spew hate; the ones we don’t want to include in the kingdom, the ones who seem to profess a different gospel and different God than what we hold to be true. It is only then that our worship and our faith are being lived out with integrity.

Bishop Vashti McKenzie writes, “it is God who will give you the courage to come to the well. It is faith that will keep you coming back until you are transformed...Be open and receptive, because more than water is available. Dip your cups deep into the cistern of spiritual refreshment, into the ever-flowing blessings of God...We can take this journey [to the well] and find ourselves transformed.”⁴

Al Sharpton story from The Moth⁵

NYT: Al Sharpton stabbed⁶

⁴ Vashti M. McKenzie, *Journey to the Well*, p. 6

⁵ <http://www.nypl.org/node/98627/audio>

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/13/nyregion/sharpton-is-stabbed-at-bensonhurst-protest.html>