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Lent 3 (Year A-2008)

Exodus 17: 1-7
John 4

“The Empty Seat at the Table”

There are many remarkable things about this passage from John 4, not the least of which is how far out of his way and out of the cultural norms Jesus goes to make sure that his meeting with the woman at the well happens in the first place. The Gospel writer tells us that Jesus had to go through Samaria, but that is simply not true. He didn't have to. In fact, in many ways it was much less convenient for Jesus and his disciples to take that route. Geographically speaking, there were other routes that were just as convenient, if not more so. But even more striking is the fact that Jesus, a Jew, would willingly choose to enter Samaria in the first place. Most good Jews in Jesus' day would do anything but. As one biblical scholar puts it, for Jews “Samaria is a despicable place. Samaritans were regarded as inferior, racially, religiously, and socially. For something like 700 years Jews and Samaritans had been arguing and generally hating one another as only members of the same family can argue and hate. Think of the bitterness, the violence, between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims or the hostility and verbal violence between [liberal and conservative] Christians. Originally it had to do with a disagreement about whose holy temple was the real one and whose city was the really holy city. But it had disintegrated into a particularly nasty racial prejudice fueled by

religion.”¹ Make no mistake about it; Jesus did not have to go through Samaria. He makes a fairly amazing choice to do so.

Yet, as remarkable as Jesus’ iconoclastic behavior is in this passage, I want us to focus more this morning on the experience of the woman he meets at the well. Here she is at a well in the middle of the day. If we were more in tune with the Middle Eastern culture around Jesus’ time, we would be wondering why on earth she is at the well in the middle of the day. Typically, women gather at the well in the morning and in the evening. Only outcasts go to the well in the middle of the day, by themselves so they don’t suffer the scorn of others. And, indeed, we find out from her little chat with Jesus why she is there at that time: she has been married five times, which is two over the legal limit. And now she is living with a man who is not her husband. Forget the fact that women didn’t have the power to divorce, somewhere along the line this woman has made a conscious decision, like Jesus’ decision to go home by way of Samaria. Her decision is to give up on people. No one seemed to care about her, so she decides not to care about anyone else. Forget cultural norms; to heck with religious rules; they never seemed to do her any good anyway. She not only doesn’t care about what others say about her, she has even given up even pretending to care.

That is until one day she meets someone who seems to care even less about cultural and religious protocol than she does; someone who brazenly breaks just about every rule in the book simply by approaching her and talking

¹ The Rev. Dr. John M. Buchanon, from his sermon entitled “Astonished” delivered at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois on Feb. 27, 2005.

to her in public. Not only is it not kosher for a man to approach an unmarried woman in public, it was unheard of for a Jew and a Samaritan to willfully speak to one another.

She must be wondering, could it be that this Jesus cares even less about what others think of him than I do? Or is it that he cares more than anyone I have ever met before? Preachers and biblical scholars throughout the ages have been raving about this passage, about how radical its suggestions are, about how transforming its view of society. But really, if we think about it, Jesus does nothing more out of the ordinary here than treating this woman as a fellow human being, as a child of God, as one who is created in the image of God. I wonder, is that really so radical?

Well, it must be because not only does Jesus' manage to astonish his disciples with his actions, but when this woman goes back into the village and tells everyone what this man had done and said, they come running out to meet him for themselves. And just for a brief period of time, just for a few short days, they do something that they had ceased doing many, many years ago, they treat one another humanly, they look upon each other as fellow children of God, equal in their Maker's sight. And even though this experience is brief and notable for its uniqueness, the Gospel writer seems to want to hint that this encounter is but a preview of things to come.

A few years ago I attended a gathering for pastors where everyone was asked to create a visual image of the church: no words, only pictures. I am a

verbal person so this exercise was particularly challenging for me. Quite frankly whatever I came up with (probably a building with a steeple) was so forced and unimpressive that *I don't even remember it*. But what I do remember is the image produced by one of my colleagues. It was a table, like a dinner table with chairs around it, and all of the chairs were occupied except one. Later I asked him about the significance of the empty seat at the table: who is it for, I asked? He replied simply, "It is for the person that has yet to be invited."²

Ever since that encounter, the picture of a table with one empty seat has come to be, for me, the overriding image of the church and Christian hospitality. Hospitality is one of those words we love to use, although I am not sure we always understand its meaning. Too often, I think, when we talk about hospitality in the church we are referring to how we welcome visitors and guest that come through our door, or we mean our ability to promote our congregation and make it attractive to new members. Now please don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with welcoming visitors or attracting new members, I just don't want us to confuse it with true Christian hospitality.

In her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass writes "True Christian hospitality is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church membership. Rather, it is a central practice of the Christian faith—something Christians are called to do for the sake of that thing itself. [We are called to] welcome strangers as we ourselves have

² Personal conversation with the Rev. Cobus Greyling.

been welcomed into God through the love of Jesus Christ. Through hospitality, Christians imitate God's welcome. [As such it] is not a program, not a single hour or ministry in the life of the congregation. It stands at the heart of a Christian way of life, a living icon of wholeness in God."³

You see the mistake we too often make is the same mistake the woman at the well makes in asking Jesus, "*How is it that you are offering me a drink?*" We think that hospitality is about us, about our nature and willingness to be welcoming. But in Jesus' response, she and we, are gently corrected: "*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.*" Jesus is saying that there is something larger going on here than the categories we use to classify one another. This isn't about who we'd like to invite to dinner, or who we would describe as our ideal church member. It is about trusting the presence of God among us.

Like the Israelites in our lesson from Exodus we need to be asking ourselves, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Do we trust God's presence to guide us and provide for us even when we enter into strange lands, where things are not familiar and not comfortable? Because the hospitality we are called to share as Christians begins with our faith in God. It flows out of our sense of God's hospitality to us. We must remember that we too were once lost. We were strangers to God and through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ we

³ Harper SanFrancisco Publishers, 2006, pp 81-82.

have experienced God's welcome, just like the woman at the well, just like the Israelites who were freed from slavery. We are called to recognize God at work in all situations and God's presence in all people and creatures. Thus, not a day goes by when we do not have the chance to practice Christian hospitality not only in our church, but in our homes, at work, in our communities, and in the world. It was St. Benedict who taught that Christian communities, if they are to be faithful to God, must embrace the poor, the outcast, the stranger and the pilgrim for in so doing, he proclaimed, we welcome Christ himself. In order to do this, we too must make a conscious decision to cross over into strange lands and treat even those we would otherwise despise as fellow children of God. We too must recognize that even when we believe no one cares about us, there is One who will not let even our most precious cultural norms and religious rules conceal the love of God.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we give you thanks for the welcome you have extended to us in Jesus Christ. Having the assurance of our seat at Your table, give us such faith and courage to extend your welcome to others, even those, especially those, we ourselves would not choose; that all of our earthly tables may more and more come to resemble that of the heavenly banquet, where Christ is our gracious host, and where all empty seats will be filled. Amen.