

21 February 2016

Community . . . or Judgment

John 4:5-30

Our Gospel reading today is the familiar story of the Woman at the Well. Jesus and his disciples, returning from Jerusalem to Galilee, have taken the road through the land of the hated Samaritans. We read John 4, verses 5-30:

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So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, '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.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, '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.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

The key conflict of this story appears in verse 9 - *Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans*. Let me explain. Four hundred years earlier, the Hebrew priests and nobles returned to Judea from exile in Babylon. After seventy years of exile, they needed to find a way to

reaffirm their distinctive faith identity. Unfortunately, they achieved this largely by a process of elimination. First they eliminated all Gentiles. Only those of pure Jewish blood were acceptable in their religion. This especially eliminated the Samaritans, the people who had been left behind in the exile and who were seen as half-breeds. Then they eliminated women – at least from any important role in their faith. And finally, they established rigid rules of holiness, which eliminated everyone with a physical defect or a visible disease, anyone who was known to be a sinner, and everyone who broke any of the thousands of rules around kosher food and Sabbath observance. Basically, they defined the heck out of their religion, largely by identifying everything that a true believer was *not*, and excluding all of those.

That's the context in which this story takes place, in which Jesus breaks just about all the rules. This person that Jesus approaches and strikes up a conversation with is a Samaritan. Not just a Samaritan, but a woman. Not just any woman but one with a reputation for promiscuity. The only thing that could make her more abhorrent to a good Jew would be if she had leprosy. But Jesus says to her, "I wish you'd let me give you some of what I have to offer – the living water of eternal life." The disciples come back and can't believe it. Why is he even talking to that person? Jews don't share things in common with Samaritans, but Jesus does.

Last week I talked about the recent sociological study done by Josh Packard on "Church Refugees" (or "Dones") – people who were once deeply involved in their church but who have left it, in fact have left church entirely. Packard sets up the main part of his book by dealing with the specific disappointments that these Dones experienced. What had they been looking for in church that they could no longer find there? And the number one answer is Community. Without exception, that's what these people valued most and longed for most deeply in their church. All of them had had a taste of what community in a church could be like. As Mark, a 34-year-old former atheist, put it:

I only stayed in that church for so long because of the connections. It was the church that brought me from being an atheist to being a Christian. I had an affinity for the people there. I don't have that anywhere else It remains the biggest argument for me going back to church, to be with other people. The biggest drive for me is just to be able to experience Jesus with other people in a community. That's really the only thing that could get me back. (pp. 31-32)

Others spoke in glowing terms of how the church had been a safe haven for them in a time of crisis, had become a family for them when their own families had fallen apart. And they're right. There really is no one else who can step into the void left by a failing family the way that a church can. No one else will stick with you with as much determination. It is the community interacting in love that makes a church. On any given Sunday, what goes on in Coffee Hour is likely to be more important than anything we do in here.

It's taken me a while to learn this, by the way. I used to roll my eyes at all those so-called "Bible Studies" that I thought were really just *social* hours. My assumption, obviously, was that the real point of church was to learn stuff. I was wrong. It's not. The real point of church is to love people and to love God, and learning Bible facts has no necessary connection to that. Community is not a thing that gets in the way of learning; in the church, community is *where* and

how we learn what matters. Notice what Mark said in the quote I just read: he wasn't brought out of atheism by attending a class or reading a book or learning more facts. What changed him was the people.

But wait, you're wondering. If all these Dones speak so highly of the community of the church, why did they leave? They left because sometimes the community of a church becomes a *false* community. A false community is one that is based on similarity, on getting together a group of people who are all alike, who're from the same socio-economic level, the same race and background, who share the same opinions, and are living through the same stage in life. A homogeneous group like that *looks* like a community, because there isn't much tension, but it isn't. It's a professional organization, or a hobby club. To use a musical analogy, a false community is like a choir in which everyone has the melody, all singing the exact same line. Unison can be pretty, but in the end it's also dull.

And for the past thirty years, we in the church have been told that that sort of dull sameness was actually our goal. We were supposed to plant and foster homogeneous churches made up of nearly identical people, because that's what makes people feel comfortable. So we ended up, for instance, with churches aimed very specifically at upper middle class Baby Boomers, designed around their preferences, aimed to attract them and no one else. The problem is: if your church is based on similarity, what do you do with people who are different? The answer is that – intentionally or not – they are excluded. As Elizabeth, a 67-year-old retired schoolteacher said in the study:

What I definitely crave and long for is the community . . . but that was years ago. Today things are so divided and judgmental, especially around superficial issues, that I can't go into a church and pretend anymore to be someone I'm not. I have tattoos. I drink. I curse. I don't think any of these things make me a bad person, but lots of people at church do.

Elizabeth uses the word *judgmental*. The Dones have left church largely because they sensed judgment, sometimes of themselves, sometimes of their opinions, sometimes of their friends. They loved the possibility of experiencing true community, with all its care and acceptance, but they didn't want to be part of a community based on similarity, where they had to pretend, or to which they could not bring their friends who swore or had tattoos or were gay. They wanted a community that would welcome people even if they were different, but instead they found judgment.

Now I'm *not* saying that we have to approve of everything that every member of the community does. I'm not saying we have to give up all moral standards. Jesus didn't tell the Samaritan woman that her way of life was fine, only that she was welcome to taste his gift as she was. The welcome of authentic community is not throwing out all standards, but rather recognizing that it's not our job to fix other people, but to love them.

So . . . how are we doing? Actually, pretty well. Oh, we're still pretty racially homogeneous, but so is Wausau. We could do better, but our context presents some limitations. As for other kinds of difference, though, I look at us and am pleased. We are not all from the same tax bracket. Far from it. We aren't all either white- or blue-collar, and we don't all belong

to the same political party. We don't all have our act together. We are multi-generational, and we actually do things designed to bring all generations together. Our Messy Church program that we started last Wednesday is one of those. So is our "Family Camp," which has now become a twice-a-year event. One young mother in our congregation told me a couple of months ago that after her child was born she wondered about finding a different church, where there were more young children, but in the end she stayed "because we have all these auxiliary grandparents here, who love my child." We do have people who don't fit a typical church mold, and despite that we have been family. I think of the heavily-pierced teenager who lost her mother and has been adopted by our choir. I think of incidents I've passed by during coffee hour: Mark Johnson helping a high school student with her chemistry homework, two teenage girls comparing notes on tattoos. Does this stuff qualify as church? Yes. Yes. It may be the only thing that really does.

We aren't a perfect community, but I think we're on the right path. And we need to be. Our nation as a whole grows more divided each day as we retreat into our respective false communities of people just like us. People spend their lives in echo-chambers where they never have to hear contrary opinions or encounter people unlike them. We only listen to the news channels and subscribe to the facebook pages that affirm what we already think. Churches have begun to be begun to be a part of this disease, but we must not go gentle into that trap. The world needs to see genuine community, where difference is embraced, and church is one of the last places left where it is possible.

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A story to close with. The Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber founded a church in inner-city Denver called The Church of All Saints and All Sinners. Bolz-Weber herself is a fairly heavily tattooed individual who swears like a trucker, and I think her bishop had some doubts about sending her to suburbia. Anyway, after a few years she had thriving congregation made up of drug-addicts, streetwalkers, transvestites, bookies, you name it. Everyone was welcome to hear the gospel. Then something strange happened. Word got out about her church, and well-adjusted middle-class families began driving in from the suburbs to attend.

They actually had a meeting to decide whether to let these new people stay. Bolz-Weber was afraid the "normal" people would ruin the church. As she put it, "I was afraid they'd dilute our weird." So they met one evening to discuss it. And at once one young transgender man stood up – I assume he was transitioning to male, since she used a masculine pronoun. The young man said, "I *like* having these people here. They treat me the way I wish my parents had."

That's what community looks like, and it's what people yearn for with all their hearts. May they find it here.