

“Grace Over Tribalism” – John 4:5-42

We haven’t progressed very far from our tribal backgrounds, have we? And that’s true for most of humanity. It’s easy to point our fingers at places in the world where tribalism is still clearly visible, places like Afghanistan and Libya, but the deep roots of tribalism run very close to the surface even here in Canada. Differences in race, religion, cultural background, family background, even where you grew up in Canada are factors that all too often create divisions. Sometimes these divisions are very subtle; other times the divisions are more obvious; in all cases the results include separation, pain, and even conflict. And it all begins with a dividing of people into “them” and “us”.

This is not new – this phenomenon is as old as the beginning of civilization – we can even see in our scriptures intertribal and interfaith wars and conflicts going back thousands of years. In today’s dramatic reading from John’s gospel we see a clear example of several instances of “us-them” objectifying that was common enough in Jesus’ day. Thank God, however, we can also see in scripture, including today’s reading, a powerful message that the grace of God in Christ transcends the boundaries of race and background – and even religious status!

This passage from John’s gospel is truly fascinating. (I know, I know, I say that about almost all of scripture, but it’s true!) We are privileged to watch an ever-expanding drama, beginning with two characters, Jesus and the woman, growing with the return of the disciples, and then moving on to include a whole town in Samaria. We know that the story surges on even further, so that the gospel is proclaimed and people respond not only in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, but also to the ends of the earth. But we’re running ahead of ourselves again.

I called this gospel story a drama. Think of the passage as a movie – as the screen lights up we begin with one of those title shots – I’m sure you recognize the kind. The opening perspective is a satellite view of the earth, with Samaria outlined, and the town of Sychar highlighted, a bit like the opening to Rick Mercer’s Monday Report, or playing with Google Earth. As we zoom in the features of the town grow larger and larger, our field of view becomes tighter and tighter, until we touch down just outside the city, and the screen is filled with one lone figure weary and resting beside Jacob’s well. There is no shade, it’s blistering hot as the sun blazes down from directly overhead. Even the flies are daunted by the heat and buzz listlessly and without much purpose. It seems like even the stones could crack under the intense blast of the sun. Even breathing is an effort, and nothing moves. It’s like high noon in a “Wild West” movie.

Finally we see some motion ... a woman, carrying her water jar, coming into focus out of the waves of shimmering heat, heading for the well where the stranger is sitting, coming to fill her jar with cool, sweet water. “Give me a drink”, Jesus says to her. “Give me a drink”. What a curious way to kick off the longest recorded conversation in the New Testament between Jesus and anyone. It seems so abrupt, almost rude. We are told that Jesus was tired, and certainly that fatigue and the heat would cause anyone to be curt, and rude – although his abruptness might simply have been linguistic. (There are only four instances of the word ‘please’ in the New Testament used in that sense, and they’re all in Acts.) Another reason that Jesus seemed so abrupt could have been cultural, since he was speaking not only to a woman, but a foreign woman! In twenty-first-century Vancouver we have trouble believing that Jesus would be rude to her simply because she’s a woman and a foreigner. It is more than a little hard for us to accept he would behave that way because of what we want to believe about Jesus, but that is the way the text tells us the conversation opened.

The woman, quite possibly because she was used to being treated that way didn't seem so much surprised at the abruptness of his command as at the fact that he even spoke to her. After all, she was a woman, and they both were to each other foreigners – “eeww ... one of them”! (Did you notice that John felt it necessary to remind his original readers that the Jews and the Samaritans didn't get along? Because he felt the need to emphasise that fact, it must obviously be a key point of the story!) Apparently this woman was not one to hide safely behind the veil of a bourkha, and she challenges Jesus not only about speaking to her but also about his request/order, pointing out that he didn't even have a bucket – good grief, did he expect to drink from her jar? Yuck! What a repulsive idea that was to her – after all, maybe his being Jewish might be contagious?!

Controversial though it may have been, that challenge from her opened a dialogue on faith and religion. At least she keeps trying to bring the subject back to religion – Jesus keeps bringing it back to the personal and faith. She reminds him of his Jewish laws, and He tells her to go get her husband. Now, instead of lying, instead of challenging him, she looks Jesus straight in the eye and tells him that she has no husband. She reveals a scrap of truth about herself to Jesus, and he tells her the rest of the truth about herself. She draws the conversation back to religion, and after some back-and-forth, Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah. In a rare – at least in the gospels – occurrence Jesus declares simply to her, “I am he”.

That was a shocking and even scandalous revelation. To a woman, and a foreign woman at that, and a foreign woman of questionable virtue, Jesus declares simply that he is the Messiah. Shocking? Yes. Scandalous? Without a doubt! This is hardly the type of person you would consider for the position of first evangelist to the Samaritans, the beginning of a movement of the gospel and God's grace to the entire world, but that's who she was and what she was recruited to be – the first evangelist to take the word of Jesus being the Messiah to the Samaritans. We shouldn't be surprised that she expressed it as a question, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”, because all her faith had told her the Messiah would be a Samaritan, not some Jew.

Sadly, many people today have the same kind of disbelief that this woman could have been the one to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah to the Samaritans. This woman would hardly be welcome in most of the “smiling churches” today. Many righteous souls today still get all huffy about the fact that this woman had had several husbands, and was currently living common-law with yet another man. Such “pure Christians” would think that such a status would disqualify her from even entry into the kingdom, let alone being chosen and used as the one who began the proclamation of the kingdom to her people. However, they should note as we do that Jesus neither chastised her nor condemned her for her marital status ... he used that information instead to demonstrate to her that he knew fully who she was. Pay attention to the text and note carefully that Jesus, knowing all that and more about her, not only offered the gift of living water to her but also enlisted her to proclaim the good news.

And then with a dizzying scene change the intensely personal dialogue between the woman and Jesus abruptly ends and the focus shifts as we see the disciples return. In our opening aerial view we had seen that group trudging off into town for groceries, and now they are back in close-up at the well. I'm sure they were shaking their heads in disbelief: “Go figure! We leave him alone for twenty minutes, and already he's in trouble, speaking to a woman!” Those faithful apparently had however learned something during their travels with him, because even if they were thinking of challenging either Jesus or the woman, they wisely held their tongues. Even the gospel author John remarks that they didn't dare speak what they must have been thinking!

As the disciples arrive the woman takes off for town, so distracted with this news that she even leaves her invaluable water jar at the well, all the time proclaiming to all who would listen that she had met the Messiah, the Christ, and many believed her.

While she is gone, Jesus, just as he used the subject of water with the woman to introduce the living water, uses the subject of food with the disciples to introduce the subject of harvesting followers, and that the fields were ripe for gathering in.

The screen opens up once again to wide angle, and now we see a crowd of townspeople coming out to see for themselves this man the woman has spoken about. Gracious hosts, they invite Jesus (and presumably his followers) to stay with them, and he does. As John puts it in resurrection language that rings in our ears Jesus ‘abides with them’ for two days - two days sleeping and eating with ‘those people’. Two days during which many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, from hearing him speak.

What a wonderful drama! What a picturesque story! We can expect the music to swell to a chorus of “amen’s” and the credits to roll up on the screen. But there’s one final scene, one final segment in closing that turns this story from a pleasant drama to a hard-hitting documentary. In a closing moment of cruelty, there is one last parting shot at the woman at the well, pointing out with painful precision that her role in the drama was transient, and her testimony was no longer needed, for the citizens of that city in Samaria had heard for themselves directly from Jesus, and then her own people discard her as an evangelist.

But that’s not the end of the story, is it? I’m pretty sure that the woman continued to tell the story of how she met the Messiah at the well, and was able to carry that good news to her people. Remember that this conversation between Jesus and someone else is the longest recorded in the New Testament – a private conversation between two people, one of whom would have to have repeated the story enough times for it to eventually be recorded, quotations and all, into the gospel. I think it’s safe to say that it wasn’t Jesus who related this story, and it probably wasn’t the disciples either. By the time John penned his gospel, and it became apparent that the good news of Jesus being the Christ, the Messiah for all peoples was not only for the Jews but for the whole world, John knew he had to tell the story of how this woman, this foreign woman, was the first to carry the message of the Messiah to the world.

Now any good movie, a good stage play, or a good drama invites us to enter into the action, to identify with one of the participants. Who are we in this story? What role will we play in this drama? Are we the disciples? We could be – they are certainly busy going about the Lord’s work, heading into town to get the groceries, returning to study at the feet of Jesus – yes, we could be the disciples.

Or are we the crowd of Samaritans, responding to the Gospel word, and flocking to meet Jesus, and inviting him into our hearts and our homes? Well, yes, we can be and we often are, but the picture of them painted here is not very flattering, especially with their quick rejection of the one who brought them the good news of reconciliation with God in this Jesus, the Christ.

Perhaps we see ourselves being the woman, carrying the message of good news to others in our community, to our friends and neighbours. Probably we can even relate to how she was soon afterwards shunted aside.

Or perhaps, just maybe, we can actually believe the gospel story, and accept that in our baptism and in our faith we are part of the body of Christ, that we are in Christ and Christ is in us, and see ourselves as Jesus in this story, outing ourselves as Christians, reaching out to others in compassion, tenderness and kindness, showing them where they too can find the living water offered by the Messiah, even Christ Jesus our Lord.