

“What’s Faith Got to Do with It”

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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John 4:1-42

By now many of you have received word of my transition plan, to take up a position with the denomination. If you did not receive the email on Friday, please let us know because we are working to make that method effective. I do not want to take much time on this until it’s the right time, and I will look forward to saying goodbye and thank you properly when that time comes.

But let me say this now – I meant what I said at last week’s annual meeting when I quoted former Buffalo Bills coach Marv Levy, “where else would you rather be” than right here and right now at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. We are on some very, very good trajectories, thanks to you all. I will do all that I can to help put those in sustainable places.

I am grateful for this new opportunity to serve our wider church, as they say, and very grateful to reconnect with my spouse and family more fully. I am not anxious to leave this place, and you all, all of which I have come to value deeply, and for which I have great hope for the future. Your Session and its Personnel Committee are already hard at work on transition plans that will keep momentum going. Pray for them; cheer them on; and get involved when invited. Keep showing up; keep your pledges on track. That’s enough of that, for now, except to say thank you already for the calls and emails and texts – I am very thankful for that.

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It seems difficult to believe that it was on this Sunday three years ago that we had our final service before the pandemic hit. There were hints and inklings, but we really had no clue what was to come. I remember bumping elbows with Graeme Frazier rather awkwardly after church. We chuckled at the short-term prospect of this. Who knew. A week later I offered a kind of live feed off my phone, with our daughter Ann – in town for the installation service that would happen two years later – serving as the camera person. Three years. No masks. No social distancing. No Pfizer or Moderna. No Fauci. No work from home. No Zoom. No tent in the parking lot. Do you remember.

More than 1,000,000 Americans died; nearly 7,000,000 people worldwide. It is important to remember them, I believe, and all who yet grieve. It is important to remember those who live

still with the impact of the coronavirus, whether physically or emotionally or economically. It is also important to remember those who served so heroically, nurses and doctors and scientists, delivery people and grocery workers and law enforcement, teachers and caregivers. Our memories are short – yet we are called to remember. And we are called to learn when and where we can, even in this place, about what it means to be a church, to love our neighbor, to extend care and compassion.

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Our gospel lesson continues in the fourth chapter of John’s gospel, beginning at the 27<sup>th</sup> verse. Jesus has encountered a Samaritan woman at the well; let’s consider now how those earliest disciples responded, and how we, too, are called to respond...

We do not know her name, though she commands considerable real estate in John’s gospel. Jesus is in the Samaritan city called Sychar. He has been traveling with his disciples. It is noon, and warm, and he is thirsty. He encounters a woman, a Samaritan woman. He asks her for a drink. Actually, he doesn’t really ask; he demands.

“Give me a drink,” Jesus says. Already the encounter is notable. Jesus, a Jewish male, would not speak with a Samaritan woman. She knows this, as does he. Yet they speak with one another, a kind of verbal dance at many levels, about water and so much more than water. Jesus is physically thirsty; what we learn is that the Samaritan woman is thirsty at a much deeper level. In what we just heard, she finally begins to understand who Jesus is, and she asks him for the living water that he offers, so that she will never be thirsty again.

They spar about her marital status. She has had several husbands, or at least male relationships, and the man with whom she is relating now is not her husband. You can read this little section many ways. Some in the history of interpretation have said the implication is that this woman is a prostitute, or at least someone with a morally ambiguous reality. We need to be very careful.

Several weeks ago we welcomed Sr. Meaghan Patterson to be with us, the executive director of Dawn’s Place. Dawn’s Place works with women who have been exploited commercially and sexually. We learned a lot, including the important difference of saying that a woman has been prostituted, rather than labeling her a prostitute. So we need to be careful here.

When I read the story without that preconceived filter, I see Jesus simply identifying her status, not to judge, but to establish that he knows her, knows her story, her circumstance, her narrative. He knows, and she knows that he knows, so that this Samaritan woman connects with this Jewish man on an entirely different plane. She finally realizes that this Jesus is the Messiah.

Then the disciples show up, and are baffled by it all, as the disciples so often are. The woman goes back to the city and becomes an instant evangelist, telling her people of the encounter and telling them what this Jesus did and who he is. We are told later that “many believed” because of what she did, what she said, that she was willing to share her experience.

I can’t help but ponder what is going on here, the immediacy of the encounter but also its rippling and far-reaching implications. I can’t help but reflect in a week when we’ve marked International Woman’s Day.

Jesus stops and talks with her, and takes her seriously. He accepts her, as she is, a foreign woman, a second-class citizen by definition, with a back-story. There is no ethical condemnation. What there is a deeply religious, theological, even, conversation between Jesus and this stranger that travels from point to point to point, from the nature of who the Messiah is to what the religious response of the faith community should be.

New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders writes that this story has two functions, at least. It presents to us an understanding of who Jesus is, but more so, it presents to us an understanding of what Jesus does. (*Written That You May Believe*, pp. 126-148)

This is a missionary story, Schneiders writes, as Jesus reaches out, a woman is converted and transformed, and she in turn shares her good news with her community.

Schneiders writes that “the entire dialogue...is the (invitation) of Samaria to full covenant fidelity in the new Israel by Jesus...it has nothing to do with the woman’s private moral life but with the covenant life of community.” (page 141)

This morning’s *is* a missionary story, but one whose dynamics the tradition has often missed. Jesus does not, literally, scare the “hell” out of this fallen woman through ethical condemnation. Rather, he invites her into a relationship with living water, so that her soul’s thirst is quenched. And she in turn travels back to her community, as we are called to do, to share the good news of this transforming encounter.

Frances Taylor Gench reminds us of the mixed history of interpretation around this story. (*Back to the Well*, pp. 109-135) Gench reminds us that this story is one that invites us in to ask the very important questions that we carry with us – who Jesus is, who we are, what we are called to do, what kind of church are we to be.

Schneiders writes that this is a story “characterized by an astonishing, even shocking inclusiveness.” (Page 147) No one is excluded, no one *can* be excluded, and in case the point is still lost on us, the story is told through the words and gracious actions of a foreign woman who

has something to offer *to* Jesus, and who like the most faithful and effective disciples, invites people into this Jesus experience that has so transformed her life.

The disciples don't get it, and they are hesitant. But we do, or at least, we may get it, as the Spirit opens us to the possibility of this encounter.

Gail O'Day (*The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX, Luke-John*) writes that from beginning to end, this morning's text "transforms conventional expectations and challenges the status quo." (Page 571) Jesus challenges and breaks open *two* boundaries: 1) who is chosen and who is rejected – Jew and Samaritan – *and* 2) the boundary between men and women.

O'Day comments that the woman is never judged as a sinner, but rather she is portrayed as a model of growing faith. And, if the woman can serve, as she apparently does, as a successful evangelist, then I would argue that her inclusion calls us, and the church, to think again about all who we have traditionally said may not serve as leaders in the church.

And we may even serve as Jesus in this story. We are drawn in because we, too, are thirsty. Thirsty for the transformation that Jesus provides, but thirsty also for the true human encounter that is made so real and powerful by those whom we would consider the "other."

I further know that each of us carries around a bit of the "other" within us – that part of our self that is not our true and best self. This encounter between Jesus and an unnamed Samaritan woman brings us ever closer to transformation of our own spirits, even as we are called to such transformation in the church and in our communities.

Mary Zimmer writes that "the Samaritan woman has been judged as a cantankerous and stubborn person, but her persistent, even sarcastic questions bring her to the realization that she is known by this man at the well. She finds her Messiah through her questions." (Quoted in *Resources for Preaching and Worship, Year A*, page 100)

So may we find a place to ask our questions. May we find a place to take our thirst. May we, in our serving, be served, in our sharing, have living water shared with us. Who knows – the well, overflowing with living waters, may be here, now, simply waiting for us to show up and ask for a drink. Amen.