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Sermon #471 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, Pennsylvania
8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Third Sunday in Lent – February 24, 2008

“Another Look by the Well”

Scripture: John 4:5-42; 3 Lent A (RCL)

Frankly, I find the whole thing to be a bit suspicious. Don't you?

Exactly what was going on that day by the well in Sychar? Jesus just happens to remain behind, alone, while his disciples make their way from the crossroads into town for food, and he just happens to take his seat at a conveniently, if only momentarily, deserted well, though he has no bucket or any other means of getting any water. And it just happens that a solitary woman sidles up out of nowhere to draw from the well, even though women rarely if ever did such a thing as go to the well without the company of others of their own gender. Men might be there, you see; people might talk, after all. And coincidentally, this is no ordinary woman, rather a person of some dubious marital history; perhaps we might say that, at best, she suffers a bit from “serial fidelity.” And in this at least “inappropriate” circumstance, Jesus has the audacity to look her in the eye and ask her for a drink of water.

My, my. Perhaps she thought this was to be her lucky day: a new man in her life, maybe a better man, or just a more gullible one. Yet wasn't she in for a bit of a surprise.

She's no slouch though; she has been around the block a time or two, and her keen awareness of the circumstances tells her that something isn't right here. A Jew, alone, speaking to her? It's simply not done. Jews and Samaritans don't mix, you know; it would be, well, unseemly. Unless... that really didn't matter to him anyway. Hmm.

And what of their rather trite yet perky conversation there at the well? Woman approaches; man asks favor of woman; woman demurs, uncertain of what he has in mind; man suggests she ask *him* a favor then: living water, no more thirst, a veritable spring of water gushing up to eternal life. Sounds good. Sounds fantastic even! Frankly, sounds a bit too good to be true. What exactly does he mean? What exactly does he want? I imagine the woman giggles rather coyly when she says she would like that water; it would save her the regular trip to the well.

Of course, she might have predicted what he would say next. "Go, call your husband, and come back," Jesus says. He might as well have just asked her if she was married. But, naturally, she says, "What husband? I have no husband." So predictable. But I gather she didn't expect what came next.

Jesus says, "You're right. You have had five husbands, and the one you are with now isn't your husband." Maybe the woman does a quick count on her fingers, and, by the heavens above, the man is right! Now that sort of puts a damper on things. She is "found

out.” Obviously he knows something of her reputation; someone in the city has talked too much. She quickly frosts over and raises up the barrier between her people and the Jews. “We don’t agree, sir, on where God is truly and rightly worshipped, your people and mine.” Clearly she feels things aren’t any longer going in the direction she thought they were going, and I gather she decides it is time to shut down; this man is some sort of seer, some kind of prophet. He would want nothing of her. He is a waste of her time. But she is so wrong. In fact, the conversation is finally taking the tack that I gather Jesus intended from the very beginning.

You see, there is a seduction occurring here at the well in Sychar, but not the seduction that the Samaritan woman, or really anyone else, for that matter, would have expected. The disciples return from the city with food, and seeing their master talking alone with a Samaritan woman, they are, at least, “astonished.” In fact, they are speechless. Doesn’t he understand how scandalous that really is?

But the woman quickly has come to realize that Jesus does not intend to scandalize her, or belittle her, or condescend to her, or take advantage of her, or anything else of the sort. Apparently, he is telling her the truth. What she is --- a Samaritan, and what he is ---a Jew, brings no real barrier between them. God is seeking those who worship in spirit and in truth; it matters not where. And if she and her people are looking for that Messiah who will show them the way to live as God would have them live, she need look no further than

right here at the well.

And that is enough for this woman. She is wooed, and she is won. Conspicuously leaving behind her pointless water jar, she runs home to tell others of her spiritual suitor and to invite them to meet him for themselves. And since Jesus' disciples are all flustered and embarrassed by what they have seen ---their master chatting up a woman at the well, a Samaritan woman even--- they turn to food as a diversion: "Eat something, will you?" But Jesus isn't hungry; he is waiting. He knows exactly what he is doing and the social risks he is taking. He is at peace. And before long the expected crowd arrives at the well, and Jesus, a Jew, a man who, by rights can hate the Samaritans, and be hated by them, instead treats them as children of God and is welcomed into their homes. And he takes them up on their hospitality; he goes and stays with them for a couple of days. Unheard of! Perhaps that woman at the well received him into her home after all, under sincere circumstances rather than coy pretenses. We know that she and many others of her city became believers in Jesus. Perhaps they even became friends.

So might we remember this from this peculiar story of intrigue and seduction at the well in Sychar? Perhaps this: that "God is an unbounded, indiscriminate Lover."* We all are indeed being wooed by the Spirit of God to become a people who let love overcome what divides us. The Good News of Christ is that nothing can come between us and the love of God. And since the Good News of Jesus and the love of God lives and moves and

has its being independent of human righteousness,^{*} perhaps our own love should be meted out in the same way, independent of human righteousness. Jesus did not love the Samaritans because they were like him; he did not love the woman at the well because she was an upstanding citizen; he did not reach out to her to tell her how wrong she was about God and chastise her for her wicked ways. He didn't require righteousness as a condition for love. He loved, because it is in his nature. And somewhere, perhaps deep beneath our layers of sadness and sin and anger and disappointment and illness and depression and fear and uncertainty that cause us to forget or reject that we are creatures made in the image of God, somewhere beneath all that, it is in our nature, too, to love.

That is, I believe, what was going on that day by a lonely well in Sychar. And the courtship hasn't ended yet.

^{*} From Synthesis for the 3rd Sunday in Lent, 2008.

^{*} Ibid.