

*Based on John 4:1-15. Jesus and a Woman Meet at a Well.*

When I was interviewing to become your Pastor here at SPC, a member of the Pastor Nominating Committee offered a seemingly throw-away line that has stuck with me ever since:

*People come to Shepherdstown, this person said, when they are ready to be healed.*

The same could be true for in our Lesson, where a tired, worn out Jesus meets a tired, worn out woman of Samaria, and together at The Well they find a peace that passes understanding.

Jesus, as he comes to The Well, is ready to be healed from the naysayers and the backbiters among the religious elite, and even his own disciples who never quite get what he is up to in the end. The woman, as she comes to The Well, is ready to be healed from the sexism and the xenophobia and quite possibly the poverty that form her daily existence, although the poverty part requires a more nuanced understanding of the text than is readily available in a 21st century reading.

That both Jesus and the woman will be made well by the encounter does not follow automatically. *How is that you, a Jew, the woman wonders, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?* It is, in a word, shocking. In context, these many years later, we often miss the drama. The 21st Century New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine - who happens herself to be Jewish - reminds us: when it comes to the animosity between first century Jews and first century Samaritans, this would be like an AWOL officer of the Israeli Defense Force waltzing into a Beirut coffee shop to beg the wife of Hassan Nasrallah for a latte.

It just does not happen.

And yet it does, emphatically, happen here in John's Gospel. And the woman is healed by the encounter, as she risks a relationship with a representative of her oppressor, as he greets her with compassion and vulnerability and humility, placing his human need for water in the hands of someone who, by rights, wants him dead. Jesus is healed, too, I would suggest, as he finds a welcome where, by rights there should be none, and is seen for who he is instead of who his ethnicity represents.

The healing continues, as the disciples return and hold their tongues in disbelief over what Jesus has done. The woman rallies the townsfolk to join her at The Well with Jesus, and the best kind of church there is begins to form: people who are supposed to hate each other become friends, playing drinking games together with a kind of living water that cannot help but restore our common humanity.

This Living Water - this *Zoe* Water, to use the Greek term here for the principle of Life with a capital L - this common cup that is the font of our identity was well on my mind at the Martinsburg PRIDE Festival, where, in the midst of all the booths on suicide prevention and mental health services, and the sidewalk chalk proclaiming *You are not alone*, our beloved Season Jones and the Eastern Panhandle Youth Alliance bore witness to the Radical Hospitality and Engaged Compassion we hold so dear at SPC. Do not ever forget God loves you, we

say emphatically to the LGBTQIA+ community today and every day, no matter what you may have heard or been taught.

In a nation where more than half of our youth now live in states that ban gender affirming care, this welcoming and affirming and celebrating of the LGBTQIA+ community is healing work, this is holy work, this is the work of Be Coming Well that draws us into the SPC sanctuary and propels us back out to the streets of the city. If there was nothing more we did to choose welcome, this would be enough.

And yet ...

I was walking on air as I pulled up to the gas station at the Martinsburg Pike 7-Eleven yesterday afternoon in the aftermath of such healing hospitality. My bubble of pride expanded when the young man with a big smile across the pump from me asked, *Do you go to church?*

*I AM the church*, I declared with an even bigger grin, ready to welcome him with open arms. He looked at me funny - which, of course - so I said, *I'm the Pastor of a church here in Shepherdstown. Come on by tomorrow at 11*. He asked me which church, and I told him, and he went back to his car to ask his friend if she had heard of it. He came back, still grinning, *is that the church that loves gay people?* I said, YES! We have a winner!

And then he said, *What about political people?* Which is when I finally saw the Trump pin nestled on the brow of his fisherman's hat. *I loooove Trump*, he said. Would that be okay?

I confess I thought about it for a split second. But only a split-second. *Absolutely*, I said. *We are all God's beloved children. You will always be welcome in the house of God.* And I meant it.

But the fact that I had to think about it for a split second did give me pause. Not because I or this congregation - or any other pastor or any other congregation for that matter - should ever reject anyone based on who they vote for, but because there are certain things we at SPC stand for, rooted, as we insist, in The Way of Jesus, that place us firmly on one side of the great polarization unfolding in our nation, and indeed the world.

By insisting Jesus himself was a refugee, we stand with those who are refugee today, which places us on one side of the great polarization. By insisting Black Lives Matter - as a *theological* conviction - we are placed on one side of the great polarization. By insisting trans youth are made in God's image and deserving of gender affirming care, we are placed on one side of the great polarization. By insisting on the moral agency of women to make their own decisions about pregnancy, in consultation with their spiritual advisors, we are placed on one side of the great polarization. By insisting guns are best transformed into gardening tools, we are placed on one side of the great polarization. By insisting Christian nationalism is a theological aberration and a moral outrage, we are placed on one side of the great polarization. We have had people leave SPC over all of the *wokeness*, as they call it, and we have had people join SPC *because* of the wokeness, as they also call it. But for me, this is nothing more and nothing less than The Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is our spiritual conundrum at SPC. How do we hold our convictions - and more importantly, how do we *act* on our convictions - while still claiming a radical hospitality that truly does welcome all? In the ministry world we call it a *polarity*: two competing values (justice and hospitality) that can never be fully resolved but can only be negotiated one step at a time one issue at a time, one person at a time.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman in our Lesson today give us a glimpse of this negotiation in their interaction at The Well. First, they acknowledge the challenge. They do not avoid it. They do not sugarcoat it. They do not pretend it is not there. They do not suppress their true identity for the sake of *getting along*. They name the enmity that exists between their peoples, and they move forward with a common understanding of the challenge resulting from that enmity.

Second, they adjust the power differential. Make no mistake, Jesus holds the power in this interaction. Yes, he is a foreigner in a foreign land, but in the context of the first century Roman world, Jews have political and economic and social power over Samaritans. He is also a man, and she is a woman. She has every reason to fear physical, emotional, even sexual harm. And yet in this interaction, Jesus allows himself to be vulnerable. He is thirsty but has no bucket. He needs her in order to be well. This helps the Samaritan claim her power in the face of the one who has kept her people oppressed. Her God-given agency is affirmed, as Jesus humbles himself in her presence.

Third, both Jesus and the woman speak their truth without holding back. Again, they do not sugarcoat their strongly held beliefs for the sake of appeasing the other. The woman claims what is holy in her tradition, and Jesus insists on the wisdom of his. We are not even clear that either of them changes the other's mind. But they are able to respect where each other is coming from.

Finally, they see the truth of each other. Jesus sees the ways the woman has been mistreated and wants her to be well; the woman sees the ways Jesus is anointed and wants him to succeed. This is a miracle! Forget about fancy water, abracadabra live forever. *This is Zoe, this is how we become well forever.*

The story ends there in the Scripture, so we do not know how or even if this community of radical hospitality continues. If Paul's letters to the communities he founds in the name of Jesus are any indication, the early euphoria of welcome beyond difference most likely wears thin and divisions take hold, mostly along power differentials.

The same has been true in the congregations I have served. Over time, even in racially diverse congregations, the White folks still hold the power. Over time, even in economically diverse congregations, the middle and upper middle class folks still hold the power. Over time, even in congregations with a large LGBTQIS+ community, over time, straight folks still hold the power. Over time, even in politically diverse congregations, one leaning or another tends to hold the power. True welcome, diverse welcome, honestly engaged welcome does not come easy. It takes a lot of work.

But there is still good news!

People *do* come to Shepherdstown, as the PNC member said, when they are ready to be healed. I know I did. I think many of you have, too. We keep coming to be healed not because we are sure we are getting it right but because we know we must keep on trying. We keep coming to be healed because we know The Well we keep finding here really is the only way to heal the world.

This place, it turns out, *already is* The Well of Living Water. The energy workers among us say it all the time. Just walk through the door and you can feel it. Something about not only this town, something about not only this building, something about the very land on which we worship holds the power to heal. We are drawn to it, even if we do not know why. And we are responsible to it.

At the end of the day, this healing well owns us. We do not own it. At the end of the day, this welcoming owns us. We do not own it. At the end of the day, This Living Water of grace beckons us. And ours is the work to share it. With the trans youth at the PRIDE Festival, with the MAGA guy at the gas pump, and with everyone in between.