

Church of the Brethren Annual Conference
Brethren Church General Conference
Wednesday, July 16, 2008
Sermon by Melissa Bennett
“Faith Gushing Out in the World”
John 4:1-42

We are invited to the well at noon...with a Jew and a Samaritan, with a woman and a man, with one feeling parched and one quenching thirst. Prejudice, suspicion, scandal, a grudge for centuries...under those conditions, these two meet. Longer than anyone else...disciples, family members, adversaries... in all the Gospels, Jesus holds the longest conversation with this woman at the well. Prejudice... suspicion... scandal... a grudge for centuries... turns to compassion, trust, grace,...and love.

It starts as an ordinary day. Each on their own journey of sustaining life... capital L and small l. Not expecting to meet anyone at the well that day, the woman is taken by surprise when Jesus simply speaks to her. The woman might be surprised if anyone spoke to her...the very fact that she drew water at noon, the hottest part of the day, presumes she wanted to avoid the crowds of the morning and evening. She was isolated and alone, by choice or by chance.

In the midst of a confusing conversation about water, we learn this woman has had 5 husbands and the man she is living with now is not her husband. We do not know what has happened in her life...but somewhere in the history of Christianity, we've come to know her as a tramp, a prostitute maybe, certainly immoral...a sinner...at least that is how I've heard the story. But NOWHERE in the text does it say why she has had 5 husbands. Is she a widow? Divorced? Abused? Disregarded? And Jesus does not make any judgment on her situation, he simply acknowledges it. Clearly, the *morality* of her personal relationships, chosen or not, doesn't seem to concern Jesus as much as it does the rest of us reading the story.

Thankfully, Jesus spoke to her, asked her for help. We in the church, at least I'll speak for the Church of the Brethren, would have to form a committee to write a query to take to annual conference to form a study committee to bring a recommendation so that we could vote on whether or not we should engage this woman.

But Jesus...when others might have dismissed her, or worse, humiliated her...Jesus engages her.

She is not oblivious to the social barriers he is crossing...scandalously disregarding. While it is her homeland, and he is the guest there, she knows Jews despise Samaritans. Not to mention the fact that Jewish rabbis never engage in public conversation with women.

To drink of her cup would make Jesus a disgrace in his community. She knows that. Suspicious of his motive or concerned for his well-being, she wonders...Why would he want *anything* from her?

Incredibly so, Jesus ignores all those social boundaries and taboos. I can only imagine that he does so at first because he is thirsty!...so hot and tired from his long journey...so desperate for water that a drink from anyone was welcomed. But even after he receives his drink, he does not simply run on to better things. He treats this Samaritan woman with respect and dignity, as a full human being, a worthy recipient of the grace of God, not as the despised enemy from whom to fear contamination. But he also does not reduce their conversation to something nice and polite and non-threatening. He engages deeply, theologically and personally.

And the woman is not a passive recipient to Jesus' offer. As theologian Bonnie Thurston says, she "asks astute theological questions and responds intelligently to Jesus."¹

A conversation with passion and tension, grace and transformation...that is what we get to witness in this story. It is a model for living the gospel, proclaiming the Good News in uncomfortable situations across all kinds of boundaries.

Today, I am wearing a bracelet made with Kazuri beads. Kazuri beads are made in Kenya by women in need of economic opportunity and fairly traded throughout the world. I purchased my bracelet in 2004 while in Kenya for the Watu Wa Amani Historic Peace Church Consultation in Africa. I was privileged to observe, witness, engage African Quaker, Mennonite, and Church of the Brethren women and men as they shared stories of Christian peacemaking in their own nations... Rwanda, the Congo, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Nigeria...

It was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. Every time I pull out my Kazuri beads, I think of that conference, those people and their painful and hopeful testimonies to the ways Jesus has called them to peacemaking in the face of persecution.

I am aware that for many around the world to even talk about the depths of their faith would bring incredible persecution. Our sisters and brothers in Africa and other places around the world, who are trying to be Christian peacemakers in the midst of war, religious extremism, and many other challenges, know what it is like to go the well at noon...to feel isolated and alone in their faith. Those of us in North America, certainly in the United States, can only begin to imagine.

And yet, we face persecution in our own communities. Racism continues to run rampant throughout the country and in our churches as we struggle with a desire to be more multi-cultural but not knowing how to get beyond our whiteness in our systems. Theological and Biblical arguments pit us against each other in the church causing chasms so wide that we, as Brethren and Brethren live in, as Dale Stoffer put it this week, "cooperative separatism" but are still

somewhat afraid to come together for a joint tercentennial conference. We know what it is like to go to the well at noon when we face persecution based on our dress, on our witness to peace, on what scriptures drive our lives. And our own fear of persecution we must confess often leads us to persecute others.

Thank goodness Jesus spoke to the woman and engaged her as her true self. He did not ignore her or her life or a difficult conversation so that he could simply quench his physical thirst and go on his way. He saw the opportunity for a deeper engagement even in the face of his own persecution.

All of us live and work and worship side by side in our own communities with people who need to go the well at noon, with people who are afraid to be their authentic selves, living their authentic faith in Jesus because of persecution... persecution in their workplaces, persecution in their families, and most of all persecution in their churches. If someone is Christian and gay or lesbian, in most denominations, certainly in the Church of the Brethren, they, like the woman, must go to the well a noon.

While we “dialogue” (or don’t dialogue) about the place of gays and lesbians in our denominations, they are seeking, like all of us, to serve Jesus faithfully. Thank goodness Jesus speaks to them.

I have the privilege of living and working side by side with gay men and lesbian women who have been transformed by the boundary crossing, amazing love of a Christ who finds more important things to focus on than the morality of their personal relationships. It is these women and men who have dropped their water jars at the well and run out to tell others about this savior who knows all about them. It is these men and women, like many others around the world, who

have the courage to be honest about who they are even in the face of persecution, that have brought me to meet Jesus anew and recognize him as savior of the world.

If we want to proclaim the message of Jesus throughout this world, we have to go the well at noon. Until we are able, like Jesus did with the woman, to meet with dignity and respect those who are marginalized, seeing and acknowledging our deepest hearts in a true sense of love, the church's service and witness in this world means nothing.

Something in the woman's interaction with Jesus transformed her life. It wasn't because he showed her the "error of her ways," telling her to "go and sin no more". Nowhere in the text does he condemn her or even call her a sinner. He simply knows her and loves her and calls her to worship God in spirit and truth.

That is the transformative power of Jesus Christ. That is what left her gushing in faith. And I believe that is our call to faith in the world.

This passage is a model for service beyond ourselves and within our own very structures and systems. We may often find ourselves in situations beyond our control, interacting with people we never imagined and yet this story reminds us to not simply get what we need or do what we have to do and run. It reminds us to seize the opportunity to meet one another with a mutual sense of dignity, respect, grace, trust, and compassion.

Both of them...the woman and Jesus...had a way of seeing clearly the complex situation before them and challenging the status quo. Even if the woman was confused by Jesus' words about living water, she recognized the absurdity of a man standing before her with no bucket, asking for a drink, and then offering her... a Samaritan woman with no name drawing water from the well at noon... living water. She was not afraid to call him out on his radical actions

OR to see that he was offering something she wanted. Jesus had a way about him that touched her deeply, allowing her to face her own life.

And she had a way about her...Jesus trusted her enough to reveal for the first time in the Gospel (of John) that he is the Messiah. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, “It is a moment of full disclosure, in which the triple outsider and the Messiah of God stand face to face with no pretense about who they are.”² Thank goodness Jesus spoke to her.

“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,” Jesus says to the woman, “but those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty. The water I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ...an invitation, not a requirement, to deepen their conversation, to experience the transformative power of Jesus, to proclaim the good news of God’s love.

We are invited to the well at noon...with a Jew and a Samaritan, with a woman and a man, with one feeling parched and one quenching thirst. We are invited to tell our own stories...to be honest about the broken places in our lives (as individuals and as denominations) so that we are better equipped to run from this place empowered to proclaim the glory of our encounter with this savior. May our lives make it so. Amen.

¹ Thurston, Bonnie, *Women in the New Testament: Questions and Commentary*, p. 83.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown, “Face to face with God - Exodus 17:1-7; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42 - Living by the Word” as found in *Christian Century*, February 28, 1996.