

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
The Third Sunday of Lent
March 19, 2017

Jacob, the trickster twin, the favored son of his mother and of God, the weary wanderer is sent on a pilgrimage to bring home a wife from his father's kinsmen. The scene of his meeting with Rachel, may have gone like this:

In the early afternoon, with the sun high in the bright blue sky, Jacob and his entourage, his camels and his servants, are weary from the long traverse of the wilderness that morning, heavy in heart, having surpassed the time they thought they would be in travel, and parched with thirst by the blistering sun, when, suddenly they hear a voice, a feminine voice among the company of men. Their interest is piqued, and instinctively they quicken their pace. Under the shade of the olive trees, there is a gathering at the well. Several flocks are there and the sheep are bellowing, moaning, pushing up against one another, pleading in their own language for someone to open the well, to roll that huge stone aside, so they may drink, until that parched feeling in their own throats is subsided.

Jacob takes a step forward and his heart stops. There's this woman, this gorgeous, graceful, shapely woman, with what he imagines long flowing black hair beneath the scarf wrapped around her head. She is a shepherdess, corralling her flock, speaking to them, nudging them, enticing them to rest, for the well is not yet opened, even for her flock, that of the daughter of the well's owner, as the local tradition is that the well is only to be opened when all are gathered.

Jacob and Rachel's conversation begins with their eyes and hearts long before words enter into it: Jacob already entranced with Rachel, and Rachel seeing with pleasure a smooth-skinned man, a man expressive with his emotions, one who would hold nothing back.

There's an expression in Jewish tradition of a "Bashert relationship" which we may translate as "made in heaven", wherein it is believed that angles join the two and the union is meant to be. This is often how the relationship of Jacob and Rachel is described. The romantics among us might imagine the scene of their embracing each other and weeping, for they know each has found their soul-mate.

Jacob's first words were not directly to Rachel but to the male shepherds also gathered. He demanded they roll back the huge stone and open the well for Rachel's flock. They balked at the order. This was not to be done. All were to be gathered first, before the waters could flow. But they did it, perhaps because he spoke with a certain authority, or perhaps they saw Rachel's grateful response and were moved into action, or maybe they knew that what was happening at this well was a part of a larger story, part of God's plan for their salvation.

Fresh water now flows freely, gushing to meet their needs, to the sheep rushing forward, to the people gathered who are cupping their hands and ravenously bringing water to their lips.

In the dialogue of language and heart, the dialogue between Jacob, Rachel, and the other shepherds, lives were changed, and the story of God's people took a turn and opened up, for from this bashert relationship, a course was set for a dynasty from which Jesus will be born.

Dialogue happened, lives were changed, and the living water began to flow more freely. This all seems to be a part of God's plan.

Jacob and his wives, Leah and Rachel, and their children and slaves leave the region of Laban and settle elsewhere where Jacob digs his own well, which is the scene of our story today: Jesus' meeting the Samaritan woman.

It was in the early afternoon, and the sun was blisteringly hot. Jesus was weary from his encounter with Nicodemus, hungry for someone's comprehension of the truth he was offering, parched for someone desiring what he desperately wanted to give: eternal life. He hears a feminine voice which piques his interest. Instinctively, his pace quickens and he approaches the grove of olive trees offering scant shade to the well and he notices a woman there, a gorgeous, graceful, shapely woman, with what he imagines long flowing black hair beneath the scarf wrapped around her head. They begin a dialogue. Jesus asks her for a drink of water and the conversation unravels from there, opening up many different layers of understanding, until she asks the key question about the proper place of worship. She went directly into the hard place, the point of contention between the Jews and Samaritans, the division between the worshippers of official Judaism, worshipping in the temple of Jerusalem, and the Samaritans, who were worshipping in the hills on Mt. Gerizim. This is the turning point in their dialogue. She went from seeing Jesus as a Jewish man she should not be talking to, to understanding him as a prophet, knowing him to be the Messiah, embracing his identity, his "I am" statement, and living into his being and love. This is what she had been thirsty for, and Jesus was thirsty to give it to her.

The woman from Samaria met a total stranger and she embraced their dialogue, went into a place of contention, and both her life and Jesus' life was changed. They experienced transformation, and the story of God's people took a turn, opened up, and living waters began to flow to all people. This woman who was thirsty for what Jesus wanted to give her left her water jug at the well and ran unencumbered to bring other people to what Jesus offered. Jesus was finally able to give what he was called to offer: living water, eternal life, the presence of the Spirit, the grace of God. This experience changed him and strengthened him, for when people received life from him, he grew stronger. Jesus' giving to others never depleted him, only fulfilled him, and this I believe, is true for each of us as we live out our particular spiritual vocation.

The same thing happened in our Exodus story this morning. The Israelites and Moses were in dialogue and Moses with God, and the people were thirsty for water, to cup their hands and pour water across their lips so their parched throats would be relieved. But they were also thirsty for the assurance that God was with them. When Moses struck the rock and water flowed freely from it, Moses was changed by the experience of being the manifestation of God's power, the people were relieved and began a deeper trust of God, and lives were changed, and the story of God's people took a turn, opened up, and living waters began to flow.

The power to change and to be changed all happens in the dialogue we have with each other in the presence of the holy. When we are willing to meet someone, to go into the place of contention, and when both emerge changed, that's when we know we're in the presence of Christ.

Now, some conversations go nowhere, like the one which immediately precedes this text, the one between Nicodemus and Jesus. No one was changed. Each one left the conversation with the same mindset, the same heart, the same incomprehension of the other. Jesus left thirsty for someone to understand him. Nicodemus left confused.

We can always choose not to have true dialogue with others, for we can always choose not to be changed, we can always choose to speak only with those with like minds, or those who will not challenge us, or those who will not introduce new ideas for us to ponder. Life is easier that way, but not faithful. The encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well tells us that we need to know the "other" in order to experience the living water, the presence of the holy. We need to stretch and learn. We need to go into those hard places of contention between us and learn about the other. I know when I find myself leaping into a judgmental place, that's my clue that I need to be in dialogue with the person I'm not understanding. And when I do, I know the presence of Christ will be made real.

This is important for us so we can be at peace with each other and release the living waters which flow among us. And it is important for us, because I believe the pattern of dialogue we hear in the story of Jesus and the woman or the one we imagine with Jacob and Rachel, is the pattern of our spiritual journey. So, if we don't practice it or enter into it with each other, it makes it all the more difficult to practice it or enter into it with God. And if we don't enter into it with God, we close down our spiritual life, our chance for transformation, our lavish drinking of the living waters.

This pattern of seeking the other, finding the places of contention, being disturbed by them, marveling at the insight we gain, and finally, as the woman at the well did, embracing the identity of the great "I am" and living in the being and love of Jesus, is the spiritual path we all are on. You may be in any of these places, and they all lead to the living water.

We come to the water, we come to the Table, we receive the body and blood of Christ, to have our thirst quenched, to be found by God, to nourish our relationships, to allow Jesus to give us what he desperately wants to give us: eternal life, lived now and forever.

We can stop the flow of this living water at any time; we can stay in relationships that do not nourish us; we can look for solace in places other than the holy; we can choose not to venture out beyond our comfort zone, but why would we do that?

The woman at the well said, "Sir, give me this water!". May that be our deepest prayer. We only need to acknowledge our thirst for the one thing that can satiate our desire, and that is Christ. Amen.