

Sermon  
The Episcopal Diocese of Fort Worth Convention Eucharist  
November 10, 2017  
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Lections

Isaiah 55:1-5

Acts 10:1-33

John 4:1-34

It is a wonderful thing to be gathered with Episcopalians . . . who are glad they're Episcopalians!

We preach our best sermons to ourselves. If I offend anybody with what I'm about to say, please remember I'm talking to myself every bit as much as I'm talking to you.

I want to begin with a question today: Does anybody here truly understand why our nation is so riven today with discord and antipathy, bordering on hatred?

The reason civil wars are often so much more violent than other wars is that civil wars involve brother killing brother, sister killing sister. And those we kill often resemble us much more than those standing on the sidelines wondering what the fight is about.

So it was between the Jews and the Samaritans. They worshipped the same God, but they worshipped that God differently. And so they grew to despise each other.

The situation at the time of Jesus was not altogether different from what we see in the Middle East today. It's not simply the conflict between Israeli and Palestinian. It's also the conflict between Shia and Sunni, Muslim against Muslim. *We often hate most those who most resemble us.*

Jesus was very, very conscious of the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans in his time. And yet over and over again he and the Gospels present the Samaritans only in a positive light. Think about it.

In the 17th Chapter of Luke Jesus and the disciples are passing between Samaria and Galilee and they come upon 10 lepers who plead, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Jesus tells them to go show themselves to the priests. On the way they're healed of their leprosy. Luke tells us that, **"one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him."** Then Luke shocks us with this information: *"And he was a Samaritan."* (Luke 17:15-16)

And of course we all know the parable of the **"Good Samaritan"**. Which of the three passers by was willing to render aid to the man who had been beaten and robbed?

Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. Every time he told a story in which he extolled a Samaritan, and every time he reached out his hand of fellowship to welcome into the Kingdom a Samaritan, he was breaking all the categories and pushing the very hearts of his disciples to their limits. But he was also making a point: "My Kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36) He who does the will of my Father in Heaven is a citizen in my Kingdom.

Now I want you to do something with me. Please bring to mind the group of people who most drive you crazy. We all have them. And don't tell me that you don't, because if you do I'll not think you're holy – I'll think you're lacking in self-awareness.

Now I'm going to share with you a little of my own story, a little bit of my own shadow, of my dark side.

I'm a sixth generation Texan, and I was raised in the Panhandle. But my upbringing was not typical of folk raised in Amarillo and Tulia, Texas. I came to something like adult consciousness during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, at the height of the Civil Rights movement and the Viet Nam War. My father was a Presbyterian pastor and a very liberal Democrat. I can remember his waking us up in the middle of the night singing in his dreams We Shall Overcome . . . totally off-key. I tell people I'm one of the few people I know who was raised by a redneck Bolshevik.

Now you can imagine in my household what would have happened if I ever once used a racial epithet. There were few worse offenses. I cannot remember my father ever once spanking me with his belt, but he assured me that if I ever used a pejorative to describe a member of another race, he would. And let me tell you, I believed him.

***But I could say anything I wanted to about the Baptists.***

I was confronted with the depth of my anti-Baptist bias when I was doing Clinical Pastoral Education at Parkland Hospital in Dallas in the 1980's. One of the wards I was assigned was the pedi-trauma unit. I was a new deacon and immensely proud of all that black I was wearing. And because Dallas is "high church" and because I considered myself "high church" I was wearing the highest collar I could find. I could barely see over the top of it!

Anyway I went onto the ward and found there a mama and a daddy with their daughter who had been hit by a car and was at death's door. The daddy looked like I would look if one of my kids was near dying. He was unshaven and unkempt, his eyes were bloodshot. He was a wreck.

In contrast, mama was perfectly coifed, everything just so. Her hair was immaculate, her make-up expertly applied, her nails polished. I was offended. How dare she look so composed with her daughter fighting for her life! I understand now that this was her way of coping, and I hope that over the years I've become a kinder man.

In any event I visited for a while, resplendent in all my catholic, high church garb, and then I asked them if they'd like me to pray with them. Mama responded with, "No, we're just fine. We're members of the First Baptist Church of (wherever) and we've prayed with our own pastor already."

***I was ticked.***

Now my CPE supervisor was a linebacker big African American Methodist pastor, and after I related my story of being upset by this Baptist mama because she wouldn't let me pray with her, he looked at me and said, "You know what I think? I think the Baptists are your ["n" – word]." Only a black man could get away with saying that to me. And he was of course absolutely right. I was just as biased against the Baptists as the rankest racist is against people of color.

So what does Jesus, that great shocker of conventional sensibilities, do over and over again? He issues the invitation to the Kingdom to folk we just don't think belong there! **And when we consider the aplomb with which he issued the invitation you'd think he thought he was God!**

He sits down at the well, alone, with a . . . woman! What's more, a Samaritan woman! And he already knows the woman's history. He knows exactly who he's sitting down with! She's been married five times – count them! Five times! – and she's now living with a man out of wedlock! And he offers her "**living water**", whatever that means! He goes on to tell her that, "**The water that I will give you will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.**"

What I wouldn't give to have that water, that well, in my own soul. Now, I know Jesus is speaking metaphorically or symbolically, but don't think therefore that the experience he's describing isn't real! As a people – as an Episcopal people – we need to *relearn the power of symbol*. Today is the feast day of *Dorothy Day*, to my mind one of the great saints of the 20th century. As you all know she was a convert to Roman Catholicism, and as such she was devoted to the Holy Eucharist. When somebody once commented that he thought the Eucharist was just a symbol, she retorted, **“If it's just a symbol, to hell with it.”**

Living water is a metaphor, it is a symbol, but it's all the more real for that. It signifies the very life of God welling up within us to animate us to transcend the boundaries and divisions of this life and so to see everyone we meet as a precious child of God invited into the Kingdom.

**And let's be honest. This sucks! It means that in eternity, in heaven, we're going to be stuck with people we personally would never have invited!**

Writing this sermon has challenged me in ways I've rarely experienced in the 42 years I've been composing sermons.

Living water, living water, living water.

**I realized in contemplating these verses that if I do not experience the well of living water flowing up in my own soul it's because I've refused to share, even if only in my own heart, Jesus' living water with some other soul I think doesn't deserve it.**

The Gospel is unrelenting, uncompromising, and its demands absolute.

But the Gospel also provides the only water and the only food we really need – water and food we all so desperately desire.

Now go back to who your “other” is, recall who your Samaritans are. We all have them.

And let's be clear about something before proceeding: they may be just as wrong about any given issue as we think they are! In the controversies which have beset our church in recent decades I could not agree with those of you gathered here than I do. You're absolutely in the right!

But hear these words:

“Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’” (Matthew 18:21-22)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also . . . . “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ***Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*** (Matthew 5:38-48)

***Be perfect!*** Probably better translated, be *mature*. Or even better, be *completed*.

My point is not to challenge you – or rather, please know that I feel the challenge just as acutely as do you.

But there is great good news in all of this. It's not simply that the well of living water springs up in us only as we're willing to share it with absolutely anybody and everybody with whom God wills it be shared. It's that God causes the well of living water to spring up within us precisely so we can share it with everybody whom God wills it be shared with. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me."

The church has a long tradition of martyrs – of witnesses. Dorothy Day. Martin Luther King. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Polycarp. Perpetua and Felicity. Peter. Paul. . . . Jesus. What marks them all is not so much that they died for the faith, though they often did. No, what marks them is that they refused to hate and, in the power of God, unfailingly loved.

When we are filled with the Presence of God, the living water, we are filled with the love of God, and under these circumstances the only people we cannot love are those whom God cannot love – and there is no such creature.

And so I leave you with this: let's together drink this living water and so become fully Christian. What's a Christian? A Christian is: a mind through which Christ thinks, a heart through which Christ loves, a voice through which Christ speaks, and a hand through which Christ helps. This is what it is to be filled with living water. This is God's command to us. This is God's gift to us. Let us together embrace God's gift and carry it to the world.