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“The Gospel in Miniature”
Trinity-Anjou Pastoral Charge
March 19, 2017

Read Sherman

Scriptures: Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-30, 39-42

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be a witness, O God, to your Way of love, justice and faithful walking with us. Amen.

Some of you may be wondering at my sermon title for today. "The Gospel in Miniature" is a phrase made famous by none other than 16th century German Catholic priest and theologian Martin Luther. Luther of course became famous for starting what would become known as the Protestant Reformation in the 15-teens and 20s. His coining of "The Gospel in Miniature" is another reason he is remembered. The phrase as he imagined it referred not to Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well, but with John's passage from last week's lectionary portion.

Many of you may know the verse he meant by heart: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).”* Today we rightly question the God image implied by this verse. What kind of love is it, we wonder, that would motivate the God Jesus knew as his Abba Father literally to send him to sacrifice on a Roman cross? Is such a God image credible to be called loving?

And yet, there is no denying this verse has rightly captured Luther's and subsequent generations of Christians' admiration as loving. It describes in few words the orthodox understanding of atonement - a fancy word for God's purpose for exposing Jesus to suffering and death on a Roman cross. And friends, of course, we Christians believe that love is at the heart of God's purpose, in everything. The exact story of Jesus' crucifixion, its mechanisms and meanings, is the stuff of much speculation, in ancient witness and today. It is the prism through which we reach talk of resurrection, new life, transformation of the world. It is, of course, the prism of Good Friday, when we reckon willingly with how our humanity has the capacity for such evil that we could betray the very incarnation of who God is for us in ancient times, and on into the present day. But that is a story we will leave for another time, but not too far off now.

No. I have a more modest aim for this message today. If we are all honest, each of us has what theologians would call a canon within the canon of scripture. By that I mean a set of stories, passages, verses, that come closest to doing for us what John 3:16 has done for countless believers before us - summarizing in miniature the true meaning of the gospel. "Gospel" we will remember is a word that hearkens back to the Greek word meaning "Good News." My thesis for this morning is that John's story of Jesus speaking to a Samaritan woman at a well is Good News for us. As a more personal witness, this story among others contains within its universe "the gospel in miniature" for me.

So why is this story so special? First of all, it signals that God's love is inclusive of everybody. It's hard for us 21st century types to get back into the worldview of the average Jewish rabbi of the 1st Century. In his time and place, Jesus was in a top echelon of privilege. What did he have going for him? He was male in a patriarchal culture. He was Jewish in a Jewish society. He was learned in an illiterate society. Olive skinned in an olive skinned society. And did I say he was male? Good Jewish rabbis didn't talk to Samaritan men, let alone women. To talk to them made oneself ritually unclean to serve in the temple. It broke religious laws and customary taboos. Yet, Jesus reaches out to this woman. He not only talks to her, he treats her with more compassion and insight than maybe any other person this woman had ever met, including every last one of her five husbands. Did you watch as Jesus mirrors back to her her own truth - no added judgment or shame? Believe me, John indicates she'd lived shame night and day for what sounds like years. She'd been made to eat and drink it by her self-righteous neighbours who thought they were better than her. They are the same ones who at the end of the story still don't get it. Did you catch that, at the end, when they tell her "Oh, we don't believe because of what you said about him. Now we believe because of what we heard." Come on you morons, can't you give this woman a break after what Jesus is revealing about God through her?

Second, this story signals that God sees us as all equal. Can you repeat those two little words for me? ALL EQUAL! Jesus debunks the idea that Samaritans and Jews have to hate each other because of different ideas about religion. Sure, the Jews worshipped God via the Jerusalem temple versus the Samaritans who worshipped via their temple on Mount Gerizim. Jesus could see far higher than that perspective. He knew a time was coming when worship of God would know no geographic, ethnic, tribal or political borders. That's how big Jesus' God was, a God who could both be God of the Jews and the Samaritans. What does that say about how we treat our Jewish and Muslim co-believers today? It's challenging to say the least, no?

Finally, in Christ there is no longer any reason to hide. Jesus reveals his father God to be loving, period. Unconditional. Like a fount of living water spilling over and getting everyone wet who's anywhere near it. This woman's story is enough for polite society to condemn her to hell and back. And here is Jesus telling her his most important, and up until then pretty secret, truth. "I am he," he tells her, when she wonders aloud about the coming Messiah. The woman at the well testifies to anyone who will listen "He told me everything I have ever done." That is code for "he accepted me for all my faults." He told me that all of that didn't matter, that I could be honest about myself before God, and that God would not condemn me." By what he said, and how he treated me, now I know the truth about God and about myself, and I want you to know that truth too."

Can you see why I want to claim this story as gospel for us, let alone for me? The only sacrifice Jesus asks of the woman he saves here is her self-identity as a victim. That is not your true identity, he wants her to know. That is the identity that has been forced down your throat by others. God doesn't see you that way - never has, never will. The only death here is the woman's false self as victim dying that her true self might be revealed. Yes, she is imperfect, there is no denying it. But this story busts the myth that God wants or requires us to be perfect wide open! No more perfectionism, folks! Just be honest about your strengths and weaknesses and try to live better, and not only for your own sake, but for God's sake.

In our Lenten Study group it's become a habit that towards the end of our allotted time together I have to say, well, we're nearly out of time, but it feels like the conversation is really just beginning. In the same way, I'll have to draw this particular reflection to a close when there is still so much more to say. So let's allow the words and experience of this Samaritan woman once again to have their last say with us, shall we? May we identify in her truth something of our own. In her yearning for healing, connection, love, may we sense the truth of our yearning too.

As for the gospel in miniature? For me? For you? I leave that up to your reflection in the days and weeks to come. But friends, whenever you find yourself being offered the Living Waters of Christ, or have the chance to offer them yourselves, maybe by or to the most unlikely person in the most unlikely place or time of your life, may

you never say no, and never believe that God will require you to die to anything more harsh than the illusion that you are not worthy. And will you join me in sharing this final word as we say: Amen.