

Lent 3, Year A
John 4: 5-42
February 23, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

To See as We Are Seen:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Wearily she turns from her morning chores. It is time to go to the well. As she steps out the door, she looks around. There is no one in sight. What a relief. How she dreads the looks they give her. How their murmurings sting her. That's why she has taken to going to the well in the middle of the day. The heat of the noon-day sun is not nearly as searing as the looks and murmurings of the women in the town.

Her water jug on her head, she picks her way over the rugged terrain, carrying with her a long legacy of pain and shame. She climbs the worn path, always keeping an eye out for danger lurking in the brush beyond. The well in the middle of the day is a dangerous place for a woman alone. When she is almost there she sees him—a Jew sitting with his back to the cool stones mounded around the well. It's too late to run away. Perhaps he'll leave her alone. After all Jews have no truck with Samaritans. That's an enmity that goes way back.

Then she hears his voice, "Give me a drink," he says to her. And in that simple request he reaches a hand across barriers that divide—barriers of gender and nationality and religion; barriers of man and woman, gentile and Jew.

There's an edge of fear and defensiveness to her reply, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

But he continues, engaging her in conversation, deepening their relationship. Slowly a tone of confidence rises in her voice. She challenges him asking, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

Then she hears his promise, "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

Imagine the impact of his words on the woman at the well—a stranger, a man, a Jew offering her a way out of her isolation, loneliness and loss. No wonder she says to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." "Sir give me this water so that I don't have to brave the looks and condemnation of others."

And so he does, but the water he gives takes on an unusual hue. He says to her, "...you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." Think of it. He sees her. He really sees her—a widow five times over, a woman so poor she has to live as a concubine. He sees her as she is—in all her pain and shame and isolation. He looks into her very core and accepts her there.

Jesus sees the woman as she is and treats her with dignity and respect. That's living water indeed—that's a spring of living water gushing up to newness of life.

I suspect that like the woman at the well, we have all had the experience of being on the far side of the line between insider and outsider. I suspect that at one time or another in our lives we

have all experienced some of that rejection, isolation and loneliness the Samaritan woman knew so well. I suspect that we all long to be seen and to be accepted as who we are, that we all thirst for the love and freedom such acceptance brings.

Being seen like that—being seen as we are—is so important. For being seen in all our humanness, our gifts and our limitations, what have we have done and what we have left undone, our deeds and our misdeeds, frees us really. Being seen and accepted in our totality lifts the chains of shame and fear of rejection.

Remember the woman at the well. After Jesus tells her he is the Messiah, she runs to town—to the center of town—and says to all the men there (and in those days there were only men in the public squares) , “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” Think of it—to those who would most likely stone her or heap ridicule and scorn on her—she says, “He told me everything I have ever done.” How freeing that must have felt!

What was it that freed her? Was it Jesus—seeing her, knowing her, accepting her for who she was all the while seeing the possibility of new life in her? I think so.

And what was it that drew the others to him? What made them say, “We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”? What freed them? I bet it was his seeing them, knowing them, accepting them for who they were all the while seeing the possibility of new life in them as well.

I believe that Jesus sees us, knows us, accepts us as we are and invites us to do likewise to others. In so doing, we help bring into being God’s inclusive realm.

I like to imagine the Samaritan woman returning with the others to meet Jesus at the well. How different her gait, her pace, her path. No longer furtive or afraid, she looks not down or to the side but straight ahead. She comes with joy to meet her lord, forgiven, loved and free.

I’m reminded of the hymn:

I come with joy to meet my Lord
forgiven, loved and free
in awe and wonder to recall
his life laid down for me.

Together met, together bound,
we’ll go our different ways,
and as his people in the world
we’ll live and speak his praise.

Please join me in singing it.