

GIVE ME A DRINK

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4:5-42
The Third Sunday in Lent
March 23, 2014
All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her "Give me a drink."

"Give me a drink." An echo of the people in the wilderness, camped at Rephidim, quarrelling with Moses, putting God to the test and saying "Give us water to drink." No "please." No "thank you." Is Jesus meant to sound rude or combative? Is he being demanding or dismissive? These are all questions we ask out of our cultural sensibilities, our time and place. But what we have here is a stark example of how we can grow in our trust in God's grace as we engage with Scripture, but only if we learn to listen to what is different, jarring, other, and seek understanding. As we will see, the same is true in our relationship with other people. We can grow in trust even when we find someone off-putting, or when we judge them disingenuous, unworthy or wrong.

It has taken years of mutually frustrating relationship with our friends in the Diocese of Western Tanganyika to understand something really important, --a fundamental cultural difference between us. We, here, tend to say what we really and

truly mean in private and we make careful and politically sensitive statements in public, right? So over and over, we have sat in one Bishop or another's living room in Kusulu, accepting their intimate hospitality and sharing our hopes and dreams for the relationship, thinking that we have an understanding, only to find that we are disappointed again and again. We think we have an understanding that we will support the work of the diocese through education only to find that what they really want when push comes to shove are more Toyota Land Cruisers. How are we to respond? Usually and thus far we have trusted that the people on the ground know what is most important for their ministry and for the spread of the gospel. We don't want to disrespect our friends by imposing our cultural assumptions and values on brothers and sisters. We want to learn and grow as we are invited to address and understand the same Christian faith lived out in ways very different from our own. We hope that our eyes can be opened to God's hand at work nearer home and in ways that we can all too often miss or ignore. So what are we to make of this pattern of thinking we have an understanding only to find that we do not have the shared commitment that we thought we did. What is going on? Are these Christians not trustworthy? Do they just want money and nothing else? Are they going to tell us whatever we want to hear and then do exactly whatever they want? Maybe we should just forget the whole thing because we don't want to learn from these people anyway if that is how they behave. Completely understandable

reactions, as long as everyone behaves as we do and says what they really mean in private.

But here's the thing: we have begun finally to understand, for reasons yet to become clear to us, that as a general rule the bishops with whom we are in relationship tend to say what *they* really mean in public, and don't want to sully the hospitality of their homes with disagreement or negotiation. It is a huge difference and one which we continue to work through what it means for our relationship. They have never said it out loud to us and wouldn't, but it does not stretch the imagination far to think they might find us 'coarse'. I hope our relationship will grow to where we can tell truth and grow together, or as we say 'grow in faith—our capacity to trust—as we engage God and neighbor.'

This kind of misunderstanding can and does happen even in our most intimate relationships when we assume we are all on the same page as to what things mean. A couple working out how they will be together frequently have to come to terms with the reality that certain behaviors mean different things to each of them and that when they impute motives or meanings to the other they will often get it wrong. One partner comes from a family where conflict is expressed through shouting, wailing and gnashing of

teeth and the other from one in which voices are never raised but steely precision and even sarcasm are the currency by which conflict is negotiated. Neither way is particularly helpful, but then learning to deal with conflict in ways that are good and productive is a lifelong task. The first few times the shouter shouts, the steely quiet one assumes that the relationship must be in deep crisis and nearly over, even though for the shouter the issue has blown over in a few minutes. Then the shouter doesn't understand the feeling of distance that results when the steely quiet one is deeply disturbed and hurt by the shouter's behavior. It will take a long time for these two to be able to listen and understand each other and decide whether when and how to adjust their patterns of behavior. Of course this kind of dynamic is so much easier to recognize in other relationships than our own.

“Give me a drink.” As best we can tell, this would have bothered those who heard the story or even anyone who overheard the conversation at the well, not one bit. They would have been too busy trying to process that a man was addressing a woman who was a stranger to him. But it was worse than that because this was not just any woman but a woman who was looked down on by Jews because she was a Samaritan. The Samaritans worshiped at their own Temple in Gerizim and resisted the primacy of Jerusalem, so important to most Jews of that day. Even more than that, some who

heard the story would twig that this was not just any Samaritan woman, but in all likelihood one who was outcast to some measure even in her own community. Why else would she be going to the well by herself at the noon hour? I was at dinner the other night when the conversation turned to what kind of people go to the grocery store in Tuscaloosa during an Alabama football game. It was considered a sign that there was something really quite wrong with them. So in the Samaritan city of Sychar: normal people went to the well in the early morning or the cool of the evening to fetch their water for the day.

“Give me a drink” is not the issue. The issue is that Jesus takes this woman as seriously as he had taken Nicodemus, a ruler of the synagogue from last week’s story. The issue that we need to grasp is that Jesus consorts with this woman, -- a woman parched for real relationship,-- without fear, not only undermining conventions that keep others down, but also explicitly undermining the power structures of the Temple while he does it. Certainly “salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the father in spirit and truth...” He listens to her deeply, cutting through the cultural norms and expectations, because as Harry Pritchett likes to sum it up (as he did in a wonderful spring lecture this past week) people matter more than rules. By the authenticity of his interest, he leads her to

confession and truth telling as deep listening and his own self-disclosure, leads to real conversation and her own almost confessional self-disclosure. He gives her living water. That experience right there is enough to constitute good news or salvation; --humanity recognized, honored, perhaps restored, certainly ennobled.

She tells others. Jesus makes clear that many people need that kind of experience. He stays two days by invitation and the community is transformed as the seeds of a new possibility are sown in their midst. *And many more believed because of his word.* That is often where gospel begins: noticing, listening, overcoming mistrust, in time, allowing others the full dignity of their humanity. Gospel begins again when we men really start to ask women about their lives, what they do, what their work or their days are like; or when we who are seeking take a teacher seriously enough challenge him or her and find in turn that our search and so our selves are taken seriously in turn. This is labor of the vineyard and it is sustaining to Jesus and also to any of us who are blessed to hear the real story of another person. Yes, we have a long way to go to overcome deep rooted sexism in our society as we see from the regularity with which sexual misconduct in the military is in the news in one example, --this, along with many other relational challenges. Addressing it begins and continues with our asking what we

are missing, opening ourselves to the possibility of deepened understanding and then finding that our trust in the Love who made us all for Love is deepened.

In our customary time of silence for prayer, I invite you to think about who in your life you know but have really never quite understood what she or he does every day, and consider not only asking but sharing something of yourself in the process. Pay attention not only to that other person, but to what is being challenged in and for you. In such ways you will participate in the work of the gospel and find that you are blessed even as you are a blessing to another. Who comes to mind? In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray....