

Persistent Friend—John 4: 5-30, 39-42
March 12, 2023- 3rd Sunday in Lent

I am a lover of words. I especially love the power that words have to change our way of thinking about something ordinary or mundane. One of my favourite examples actually comes from church life. In the former structure of the United Church every person at the former Hamilton Conference office is assigned a Presbytery to which they are responsible for maintaining regular correspondence and attending meetings. Now, there are many terms they could choose for a person in this role: a liaison, a representative or a delegate. Instead they choose something very different, a “persistent friend”, so that every Presbytery, back in the day has a persistent friend from Conference office. What a creative and beautiful term, persistent friend—someone who loves you and cares deeply for you and will stand by your side through the roughest of times. Everyone needs a persistent friend.

It is these words that come to me as I reflect on Jesus’ relationship with the Samaritan woman. To the woman I think he comes across as more of a pest though, sometimes persistent friends are like that. She never expects to engage in a conversation with a strange man at the well, she expects to get her water and go. Why else fetch water in the blazing noon day sun when everyone else goes in the cooler morning hours. More than a pest, she probably views Jesus as a threat. This conversation is wrong on so many levels, John’s audience would’ve been scandalized. Jesus chats with a woman who is not his wife, sister or mother (a big no-no), he chats with a woman who is an ethnic and religious outsider (a bigger no-no), he chats with a woman who has had 5 husbands (there aren’t enough nos for that one).¹

The Samaritan woman has every reason to see Jesus as a threat; not a friend. But Jesus will not let her go, he is a persistent friend. This confounds her, ‘why would this Jewish man want anything to do with her?’ You can see this confusion in her struggle to come up with a term that describes her relationship with Jesus: Jew (she says with scorn), Someone greater than Jacob? (she says questioning), Sir and Prophet (she says with a certain admiration). Sometimes we can perceive the people who want the best for us as a threat. Think of a friend who tells you something you need to hear but don’t want to hear. This resistance is often rooted in our layers of wounds.

Each of us is like a set of concentric circles. The inner circle being our true selves, the place where the the image of God in which we are created is evident. This is the place unaffected by the expectations or impositions of other. Here we know our gifts and the

¹Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Wounds and Wells; A Sermon on The Samaritan Woman*, Patheos, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2017/03/wounds-wells-sermon-samaritan-woman/?utm_source=!!%20Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=NL%20Best%20of%20Patheos%20&utm_content=14382, March 21, 2017

work God has for us to do. It is the place of our deepest integrity; it is the place of the soul.

The outer circle are the layers that life places on us, fears, insecurities, traumas, wounds. These are the layers that result from abuse, neglect, injustice, and oppression, from not being accepted for who we are and more. We all have this outer layer, our life circumstances determine its thickness. You might even be pondering what makes up your outer layer right now. The thing is we can get so defined and shaped by this outer layer that we forget or fail to realize that there is something deeper and sacred in each of us. The boy who grows up being physically abused winds up abusing his own family. The girl raised similarly marries an abuser. The child growing up in fear becomes very averse to risk, taking few chances in life. The child raised in a family where love and acceptance are conditional on good behaviour becomes a people-pleaser. The black child exposed to the racism of lower expectations in the school system decides not to go to university. The spiritual journey, the Lenten journey, in part, is about getting through that outer layer of imposed definition to our true identity, that lies at our centre; a child of God.²

But that can be a scary process. When someone comes along and speaks to the deepest part of who we are, sees beyond the layers to the inner core, it can be frightening. They are in effect saying, 'I know the real you, the beautiful sacred you, I can see beyond the fear, beyond the wounds, beyond the hurtful behaviour, beyond the helplessness.' If we are to accept and embrace that view of ourselves then we have to change, we have to let go of who we thought we were, without really being sure that the promised sacred core of who we are is actually there. That's why addicted people push away those who love them, that's partially why women frustrate their families by staying in abusive relationships, that's partially why 2slgbtq plus people stay in the closet, that can be why a person with low self-esteem refuses to share their gifts even when asked by someone who sees their giftedness, that can be why a gifted, resourceful person stays in a dead-in job even though someone close says 'you could be so much more.'

It doesn't take much imagination to suppose this set of circumstances in the story of the Samaritan woman, because she doesn't want to be seen. I imagine her lost in her thoughts, the heat of the noon sun pressing down on her, sweat stinging her eyes as she makes out a figure sitting at the well and she takes a deep breath, braces herself, and makes sure to not make eye contact. Which doesn't matter because for some reason Jesus starts talking to her.³ Jesus is the persistent friend that will not let her go, the friend who sees through the thick layers of woundedness life has placed on her. She is a woman and he is a man but Jesus sees deeper. He is a Jew and she a Samaritan but Jesus sees deeper. Jesus sees beyond the wounds of the judgement she's incurred because of her marital situation. He sees beyond all that, beyond all the layers of life, to her very core. Jesus is the persistent friend who stands by her, not judging her but offering her

² I am indebted to the Rev. Karen Hilfman-Milson for this analogy of the two concentric circles.

³ Bolz-Weber

acceptance and hope. Jesus is the persistent friend who sees beyond life's layers and goes to the core of her identity, revealing to the Samaritan woman the truth that she is a child of God. We see this in the woman's response, she is no longer confused about Jesus' identity. To her Jesus is messiah—the one who reveals God to her. She must share this with everyone.

And that is the way the Holy One works with you and me. God is our persistent friend as well—present in the deepest part of our being, sticking by us, seeing beyond our outer layer to our true and holy selves. That's often what the discomfort of the spiritual journey and change is all about. It's our persistent friend speaking from that core layer, loyally sticking by us, calling forth our true selves, not allowing us to shortchange ourselves without notice. Like a chick pecking away persistently at the shell. This is the essence of the spiritual life and Lent, to let the layers fall away and allow the life inside to emerge. Thanks be for this grace.

Rev. Joe Gaspar