

March 19, 2017
Third Sunday in Lent

“Drink Deeply”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Exodus 17:1-7 ~ John 4:5-42

I did my Clinical Pastoral Education internship at Advocate Christ Hospital in Chicago and was blessed to have as a supervisor a woman who based her supervisory theory on the work of Jean Baker Miller and Irene Pierce Stiver, of the Stone Center at Wellesley College. These feminist therapists note how Freud and all his "psycho" heirs have seen autonomy and individuality as the goal of personal formation. This is a patriarchal approach to psychology. Autonomy and individual isolation are particularly male ways of being in the world. But the Stone Center therapists say that we are formed most by our relationships with one another, and our capacity to make mature, mutual, enduring relationships is the hallmark of healthy personality.

Pierce and Stiver call the book which sets forth their theory, *The Healing Connection*. It all begins with what they call "the central paradox" ... that we long for emotional intimacy to escape our existential loneliness ... so we make connections with other people. We long to know and be known. At the same time we fear loss of identity ... that we might be eclipsed by another ... so we disconnect from people to feel safe. Back and forth we go between connection and disconnection like so many Ping-Pong balls ... longing for closeness ... and sabotaging it at the same time. Sometimes, disconnection is a good and necessary thing ... and it can be done without damaging our relationships. More often it is done abruptly and painfully ... without our even being aware why we are disconnecting. But it is primarily through connecting with one another ... while maintaining clear boundaries ... that we become whole persons. Unfortunately, damaging relationships lead us to disconnect and further withdraw from others ... leaving us fearful and untrusting of the connections we need most. We wither away emotionally at a safe distance from those we love.

We see this theory illustrated in the story of the woman at the well. It is at once a patriarchal and a female friendly story. Consider this, we know high and mighty Nicodemus, Ruler of the Pharisees, by name and title ... but the Gospel tradition doesn't even preserve the name of this woman at the well. However inclusive Jesus may have been of women, the early church and its authors were mired in the patriarchy of their day. The same thing happens with the woman who anoints Jesus' head shortly before the crucifixion, of whom Jesus says in surprisingly eucharistic language, "*Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her,*" (Mark 14:9) but then the *gospel writers* don't even remember her name!

Preachers have been victimizing this woman at the well further for years by characterizing her as a seductress ... assuming she had been divorced five times ... that she was intimately involved with the man she was living with when Jesus met her ... but the text doesn't say any of that. She

could have been widowed five times. She might have lived with a kind soul who welcomed her into his home for protection.

Perhaps Jesus is more concerned about her loneliness than her sinfulness. She tells the townspeople, "He told me everything I had ever done." Perhaps that included her sin. But would she run to tell them about Jesus if all he did was list her shame and attack her lifestyle? What if Jesus also talked to her about the good she had done ... the gifts she had shared ... her continuing potential as well as her past? And have you ever heard a single preacher criticize the five men who may have abandoned this woman in the first place?

On the other hand, this is a surprisingly female friendly text. It is the longest dialogue with Jesus included in any of the Gospels. The woman at the well is the only person to whom Jesus confesses that he is the Messiah sent from God. And the story of a Jewish male ... speaking alone with a Samaritan female ... breaks all the taboos of the day when it was written ... but it is still included as gospel. What can we learn from the story?

We learn that healing begins with connection. The woman is alone at the well in the middle of the day, we don't know why. She seems intentionally to go at a time of day when the well is least often frequented. Is she avoiding the crowds? Is she ashamed to go in the early morning or the late evening when other people gather there because of the attitudes they have towards her? Is she taking a break to get away from a difficult situation by doing a chore in the middle of the day? We don't know.

We know why Jesus is there. He is traveling through Samaria, something a Jew of those days would seldom do ... but his own people have been unusually unfriendly to him lately, so he leaves Judea to head for Galilee by way of Samaria. He comes to Sychar in the middle of the day ... stops at the well feeling bone tired ... weary in body and soul. He is also alone. He sends the disciples into town to get some burgers and fries, but his aloneness is deeper than that. The Pharisees want his head. His own followers don't understand him ... and wouldn't like what he is about if they did understand. And if they don't understand him ... they don't really know him. And if they don't know him ... they cannot love him. And if his closest disciples don't love him ... he is indeed alone. So they meet, these two, Jesus and the woman, two lonely, weary people, at Jacob's well, in the middle of the day.

Jesus reaches out to her ... speaks to her ... asks her for a drink of water. This surprises her. Jews do not reach out to Samaritans. Righteous men do not speak to unescorted women. But his speech offends her customs as well as his ... it crosses a social boundary she might just prefer to keep. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" She is bold enough to name what is between them. She is also protecting herself ... setting a boundary ... establishing a safe distance.

Jesus tells her that she should be asking him for the living water. Like Nicodemus, she takes Jesus too literally, which has been the mistake of many of Jesus' more dull witted followers. They hear the words but are clueless to the concepts. She says, "Well, how you gonna draw water without a bucket Mr. Oasis? You more high and mighty than our ancestor Jacob who dug this well?" I like this woman so I always give her a Texas accent. She isn't taking any nonsense

off some stranger from Judea hanging around her town watering hole. Jesus makes it clear he isn't talking about this well. *"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but 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"* (John 4:13-14).

The woman drops her guard ... lowers her shields ... shows her vulnerability. She almost begs Jesus for this living water, and how does he respond? *"Go get your husband."* That seems like a non-sequitur to me! What does her husband have to do with the living water? Usually, when people change the subject so dramatically in a conversation, it's a sign that they're uncomfortable ... either with the topic or the circumstances of the conversation. Is Jesus suddenly disconnecting here because they have drifted into an uncomfortable zone ... the intimacy of this conversation crossing acceptable social boundaries as it does? Is Jesus suddenly coming to his senses, and suggesting that he continue this chat with her husband, as is proper? Or is Jesus' question directly related to the living water somehow ... and not a non-sequitur after all? Could it be that her situation in life reflects a disease of her spirit ... an inability to sustain healing relationships of mutual growth and giving? Could it be that the inability of six men to love this woman as she needs has led her to withdraw from relationship and community into isolation ... in hopeless despair of forming a healing relationship? Could it be that relationship is precisely the way we tap the fountain of living water after all?

For the most part, men are defined in our society, and self-defined by what they do. Women are defined in our society and self-defined by whom they love. That's not true of all men and all women, of course. But the Stone Center has recognized that a women's way of being in the world ... defined by relationships ... may actually be healthier for all of us than a man's way of isolated individual competition. What is more important, after all, career or family, accomplishment or relationship? So Jesus confronts the woman with her failure to build successful relationship. *"I have no husband."* *"That's right, you've had five, and you aren't married to the man you're with now."* I don't hear Jesus being harsh here, but firm; also compassionate, empathizing with her deepest pain.

"I see by your outfit that you are prophet," she says. Men are known by what they do, and what they often seem to do best is slide off into a superficial cognitive discussions of sports or business or great ideas when faced with a conversation about feelings ... which they experience as far too sticky and vague ... and which seem to attack their central paradox like a solar eclipse. This woman knows men well. And for her, this is a non-sequitur of course, meaning, "Buddy, I don't want to talk about the roller coaster ride of my love life with you. That's none of your business." So, "I see by your outfit that you are a prophet. Let me guide you into an esoteric theological discussion which will keep the conversation from being so personal and reestablish our boundaries again. We Samaritans - did you notice I'm a Samaritan? - believe you should worship God here on this mountain." (She could point to it from where they were standing.) Centuries ago the Samaritans had built a Temple on Mt. Gerizim, which the Jews had destroyed about a century before. It was a major bone of contention between them. "You Jews - I noticed you are a Jew - say you must worship God in Jerusalem. What is your opinion on the subject?" She disconnects from Jesus in a subtle way, by setting the stage for him to disconnect from her. She doesn't have to turn her back on him. She can get him to reject her by reiterating the

superiority of Jews to Samaritans. If he's off somewhere up here (in his head) she doesn't have to deal with what's in here (in her heart).

Jesus doesn't take the bait. *"The hour is coming, and is now here. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth"* (John 4:24). He turns her attention to the apocalyptic future, and for the second time she is suddenly open, vulnerable, honest. *"Ah, I know when the messiah comes, he will answer these questions,"* she says with longing. It is almost a prayer. If anybody ever needed a Savior, she does. And now he moves beyond all riddle, all pun, all allegory, all symbolism, all parable, all obscurity of speech. "You're lookin' at him," he says. "That would be me."

You see what happens here? Jesus is revealed in the continuing conversation ... in the maintained connection of their spirits. She needs living water and he is its source. She needs a messiah and he is the messiah. It is a healing connection for both of them. The disciples come back and are surprised to find him talking to a Samaritan woman of all people. They put his double cheeseburger and fries down before him ... but he is no longer hungry, no longer weary, no longer alone. The connection with the woman at the well has fulfilled him. It is the healing he needs, too. The woman goes precisely to the people she has been avoiding and she testifies, "I met this guy. He told me who I am. He can't be the Messiah, can he?" Why does she ask this? Because one encounter with Jesus has renewed her spirit ... reconnected her with God ... healed her deepest loneliness. She is no longer afraid of community because she has been loved for who she is as a whole person. And then, she leads them all to connect with the Christ. This is the healing connection ... our connection with God ... our connection with one another in community ... our connection with the stranger who meets Christ through us.

Relationships can be damaging, demeaning, ultimately destructive. But healing comes through connection with the one who loves you most. Healing flows through your letting God love other people through you. All of our relationships ... family, church, friendships, associations, marriage and partnership ... are places where the waters of life can flow ... if we are connected to the Source, to the free flowing fountain of God's grace in Christ.

And Jesus meets you at that well deep within your heart of hearts ... in the middle of the day ... where you go alone ... because no one else can go there with you. He comforts you ... and he confronts you ... and he connects you with God in spirit and in truth. And if you have the courage, the grace, the pluck to maintain connection with him, you will be healed, and he will send you into the world to make that healing connection with others. Jesus offers us the fountain flowing from a well that never will run dry. Come, let us clear the well of our hearts and drink deeply of that grace again.

May we pray?

In the hard heat of the day when we think we are alone and forgotten, abandoned and exhausted, you come to us Jesus, offer us a drink of cool refreshment to quench our thirst and renew our spirits. Sometimes you come in the hug of a friend or the encouragement of a co-worker. Sometimes you come in the gratitude of someone we can help. But we are not alone. You have set us in a network of healing connections, and all of them have been for us the watercourses of

your free-flowing Spirit. Forgive us where we block the flow and wander away from the wellspring of life to walk the desert wastes of selfish isolation. But we return now to the streams of mercy never ceasing ... to the waters of our baptism ... and the showers of your grace ... and the still waters which restore our souls ... and we ask you to help us transform every relationship into a place where the healing waters of eternal life flow through us until the whole world is full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. Amen.