

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
March 27, 2011
John 4:5-42

Lent 3, Year A

She was someone I'd never gotten along well with, and we were having a tense conversation. The more we talked, the more annoyed I got. Eventually, I ended up saying something that really was not very nice.

A little later, I rehashed the conversation with a couple friends. One friend said that the person had deserved my mean comment, and it served her right. The other friend said my comment really wasn't that mean after all: people say things like that all the time. I was feeling a little soothed by the time I recounted the conversation to Marshall. As I was halfway through my retelling of the conversation, he raised his eyebrows and said, "You didn't say something mean, did you?" I told him what I had said. He said, "That was a horrible thing to say! You really messed that one up." And then he gave me a big hug and said, "But I love you anyway." And I started to cry.

I have to admit that even though it was not a completely pleasant experience, it was a big relief to be able to have someone recognize my guilt, and tell me he loved me anyway. When we think of the people who see our faults and love us anyway, whether they are spouses, partners, parents, or friends, we know that those are the people who love us most truly. I think of Lent as a time in which I can come to God, and have God see even the meanness in me, and feel the relief of hearing God say, "You really messed that one up. But I love you anyway." And God gives me a big hug and lets me cry in God's arms.

The experience of having someone know my guilt and love me anyway is similar to the experience of the Samaritan woman in today's gospel lesson. There are several

reasons why the Samaritan woman would not expect Jesus to talk to her at all. First, she is a woman. Verse 27 tells us that the disciples were astonished that Jesus is talking to a woman, which is something rabbis did not normally do. Next, she is a Samaritan. The Samaritans lived near the Jews, but they used only the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, and they had different rituals, so the Jews considered them impure, and as verse 9 explains, “the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.” Third, she is living with a man who is not her husband. In the ancient society in which this woman lived, a woman’s survival depended on her relationship with a man who would support her economically and protect her. We do not know what happened to this woman’s five previous husbands, whether they simply died and left her widowed, or whether they divorced her. Either way, she has suffered a lot of loss, and since she cannot live on her own, it seems she is now reduced to settling for a relationship in which she has no rights, no security, and the awareness that at any time she can be discarded and left helpless. In addition, she suffers the contempt of everyone in society.

John makes a point of telling us that she comes to the well at noon, which is the hottest part of the day. I would not be surprised if she chooses that time to come to the well because she knows no one else will be there in the scorching heat, no one will be there to scorn her, or mistreat her, or to remind her of the shame she feels. But on this day, there is someone there. And instead of rejecting her, he talks to her and even asks her to draw him some water. With amazement, she exclaims, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” As the conversation continues, he offers her a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. I can only imagine her joy at hearing that this water would not only prevent her from being thirsty, but would relieve her of the

humiliation of having to appear in public to get her water. She responds, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

But when Jesus says, “Go, call your husband, and come back,” I expect that her heart starts pounding. She has probably had plenty of experiences in which someone’s knowing about her and her life leads to rejection or contempt. She gives as little information as possible, saying only, “I have no husband.” But Jesus knows her: he knows her fears, her sorrows, her shame, her guilt. He tells her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true.” The woman immediately changes the subject to Jesus’ identity, saying, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” As the conversation moves along, she says she knows the Messiah is coming, and Jesus tells her he is the Messiah.

What is fascinating to me is what happens next. This woman who had been terrified that Jesus would find out about her and her life has been transformed by the experience of having Jesus know and accept her. Instead of letting the world humiliate her, she goes back to the people who have shown contempt for her and proclaims her message. Before, having someone know what she had done was her greatest fear. Now, having Jesus know what she has done is her greatest joy. As soon as the disciples arrive, the woman leaves her water jar and goes back to the city. She tells the people, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” She has not worked out the details of her theology, and she is not even completely sure she believes that Jesus is who he says he is. But she has felt the power of being known and accepted, and this has enabled her to invite others to come to Jesus too.

I expect that what makes her testimony persuasive to the other Samaritans is that she does not present herself as a know-it-all. There is nothing about this woman that is holier-than-thou. She is simply a person who has hope that this experience of being known and welcomed by God is real. She has the combination of courage and humility that enables her to tell others about her experience with God and to invite them to come and see for themselves.

People today also want to hear about faith from someone who isn't a know-it-all, and who isn't holier-than-thou. Your neighbors don't want a slick presentation, they want authenticity. They want to hear about faith from a regular, down-to-earth person: you.

Marshall is a very fine Latin teacher. The quality of his teaching is due largely to the fact that he genuinely believes in the value of what he's doing. When he's talking to a teenager who's considering signing up for Latin, he can articulate the various reasons that learning Latin is worth doing. But that goes only so far. There are plenty of teenagers who shrug and think, "Yeah, whatever, he's the Latin teacher, so of course he's going to say that." For those teenagers, what makes the difference is if their friend says, "Oh, we learn a lot of cool stuff in Latin class. You'd really like it." Or if the nice woman they babysit for says, "Oh, I'm so glad I took Latin in high school. It really helped me when I was in law school and I still use it today. Go ahead and sign up for it." A nice person who isn't a Latin teacher can make all the difference.

When I talk to people, I can articulate various reasons that church involvement is worth doing, and why practicing your faith is worth doing. But that goes only so far. There are plenty of people who shrug and think, "Yeah, whatever, she's a priest, so of

course she'd going to say that." For those folks, what makes the difference is if a friend says, "We do a lot of cool stuff in church. You'd really like it." Or if a neighbor says, "I'm so glad my faith in God and people's prayers for me have really helped me through some tough times, and I still rely on that comfort and strength today. Would you like to come with me?" A nice person who is a layperson can make all the difference.

Marshall's father was a Latin teacher too. In his generation, any teenager who planned on going to college automatically took Latin. It was expected; it was what everyone did. Marshall's father sometimes gets a bit nostalgic about those days, when taking Latin wasn't a choice; it was simply what people did. In the generation Marshall teaches, the luxury of everyone taking Latin by default simply doesn't exist. You have to want to take Latin.

There are people who look back nostalgically at the past in which people automatically went to church. It was expected; it was what everyone did. In my generation, the luxury of everyone joining a church simply doesn't exist. You have to want to come to church. And that makes it all the more important for laypeople to take a little initiative to talk about what you like about your faith, and to invite people to church. You do not have to have a conservative theology to do this.

I was reading results of a huge study of Episcopal Churches called Faith Communities Today (FACT for short). What intrigued me most were these statistical results:

"Congregations that are "very liberal" were most likely to have grown in worship attendance (38%) followed by congregations that are "somewhat liberal" (32%) or "very conservative" (30%)."

The top two categories for church growth are congregations that are "very liberal" and "somewhat liberal"! These results showed up not just in this year's research, but they are

consistent with findings from three years earlier and six years earlier too. Liberal-minded people want a place where they can worship God. The Episcopal Church welcomes you! So go ahead and be bold. St. Stephen's has wonderful people who began coming because a friend invited them, the most recent being our two newest members: Pat, who was invited by Dawn, and Don, who was invited by Sylvia. This congregation has become a place in which they have felt known and loved. Dawn and Sylvia can invite people to meet Jesus. The Samaritan woman at the well can invite people to meet Jesus. You can invite people to meet Jesus.

7 out of 10 Americans say they would attend a church service if a friend invited them. Think of all the people you know through volunteer organizations and community groups and exercise classes and all sorts of other connections. Would some of those folks be happy to attend a church service if you invited them?

Like the Samaritan woman at the well, we don't have to be well qualified, we don't have to have all the answers. We don't have to be perfect. All she says is, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" She helps them make the contact. Jesus takes it from there.

Our Bible passage goes on, "Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'it is no longer because of what you have said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know this is truly the Savior of the world'."

The Samaritan woman at the well was known by Jesus. She knew Jesus. She helped other people know Jesus. We can too!