

Third Sunday of Lent (Year A) – John 4:5-42
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Thirsting for Love

Last Sunday some of you met a couple of my clergy friends and colleagues who recently moved to Flagstaff from New Mexico. Lynn and Roger and I hadn't seen each other since before they went to seminary - which was probably about 15 years ago. A lot has changed in our lives since then, and mostly for the better. Of course, we reminisced about our common time together at the Cathedral in Albuquerque, especially about people who made a positive impact on us and others in parish life and our community. It's always interesting to reminisce about old friends only to find out something new about them. It's kind of like reading someone's obituary and finding out really wonderful things about that person's life that you never knew during the short window of time that you shared together. One of those people was a man who grew up in the parish where Lynn & Roger recently were co-vicars. At some point, George ended up moving from his hometown of Gallup to Albuquerque. Many of us at the Cathedral knew George later in his life. He had already retired – and some of you know what that means. Life just gets busier in other ways. What I remember about George was that he was a devout lay leader of the church, and he was always kind to me and my daughter. I don't

know when George took up painting, but he always had at least one painting in the Cathedral art gallery. Some of his paintings were the size of a beverage coaster, yet had very intricate details. The one painting that had a lasting impact on my memory, my imagination, and my heart was of a well in a desert community. As I contemplated the image I was immediately drawn to scene described in today's Gospel reading from John. Although there were no people in the painting, their absence allowed me to imagine what it must have been like to be in that moment in time with the Samaritan woman and Jesus; or even to imagine myself as one of them approaching the well to quench my thirst – my thirst for water, and my thirst for God's love in my life.

We all know what it is like to be thirsty on a hot day in the desert sun, and the relief we feel when there is a shady place to rest with a cool drink of water. But this encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well was so much more about the transformation of their relationship than about a transaction related to a simple cup of water. Both Jesus and the Samaritan woman know that their cultural contexts do not encourage interaction, mutual understanding, collaboration, or friendship. Yet both of them have been shaped by other deep cultural practices – those of faithfulness in hospitality towards strangers. And even though men and women were discouraged from speaking to each other alone, even in public, Jesus and the Samaritan woman

recognize that something is different about this situation – something so wonderful and amazing that they pause to honor the divine possibility of that moment. What began as an ordinary situation – thirsty people needing water - has the possibility of being transformed into an extraordinary life-changing event. But only if they risk acknowledging the presence of Divine Love in their midst. With great courage and hope, the Samaritan woman risks giving voice to the cultural norms that would otherwise separate her from even having a conversation with Jesus. Sometimes cultural norms become so engrained that we forget how they came into being and why they remain so pervasive in the fabric of a community - even when they don't seem to be relevant to our ever-changing current context.

Last week we heard about Nicodemus questioning the cultural norms of his religious community. He was curious and intrigued by who Jesus was – how he was bringing healing and hope to the Jewish region surrounding Jerusalem. And he was scared by the message of God's inclusive and unconditional love. Nicodemus stepped out of the cultural norms of his religious community to find out more about Jesus – not by talking to other people about Jesus' radical perspective on God, or speculating about who their “true” neighbors might be, or by seeking out Jesus to personally attack his viewpoints. Nicodemus stepped out of the cultural norms of his religious

community with the hope of stepping into the possibility of learning and experiencing something new about God's abundant love. Both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman had the courage to risk giving up their preconceptions - about God and Jesus and neighbor - for the possibility of being transformed by Divine Love. They risked listening with the ears of their hearts despite what they had been taught by the habitual practice of unexamined cultural norms.

Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, we have many opportunities to be transformed by Divine Love in seemingly mundane daily encounters when we recognize and respond to God's abiding presence in our midst. One of the practices of spiritual formation that supports the recognition that God is always with us, is to imagine or actually place an empty chair in our midst and invite God's loving presence into our thoughts, our conversations, and our actions.

I wonder, what kinds of conversations we might have in our minds and with each other if we first imagined or set a place for God in our hearts.

I wonder, what kinds of conversations we might have if we opened our ears to ask questions and listen for understanding.

I wonder, how our relationships might be transformed if we made the effort to consider the validity of a perspective different than our own.

This past Wednesday during our Lenten program, Jan Haury showed us a couple of segments from Martin Doblmeier's video on *The Power of Forgiveness*. One of the segments shows a scene from a group session on forgiveness and reconciliation in which a person sits in a chair and shares how they experienced a certain situation in which they were hurt by someone else. After the initial reflection from their personal perspective, that same person gets up and sits in another chair and verbalizes how that other person might have felt and experienced that same hurtful situation.

This practice of imagining what it's like to sit in another person's chair offers all participants – the speaker and the listeners – the opportunity to be transformed by love and reconciled by love. It is our shared faith and hope that we have been, we are, and we will be transformed by the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. May we, like the Samaritan woman at the well, be constantly alert to God's presence in our midst. And may our thirst for Divine Love be quenched when we have the courage to faithfully listen with the ear of our hearts.

+ + +