

“Common Suspicions and Living Water”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
February 24, 2008
Third Sunday in Lent
Scripture: John 4:3-42

Will Blythe, a University of North Carolina basketball fan wrote about a scene that I want to quote at some length. Non-basketball fans please bear with me for two sentences and you will, I believe, find significance beyond sports.

Not long ago, as I watched Carolina endure a particularly ugly sequence against Duke, I scared my girlfriend’s nine-year-old son, Harry. (I had already terrified the dog, the beloved Gracie, who had fled into the bathroom to avoid my raving.) Duke’s Dahntay Jones had just driven home a particularly obnoxious dunk and was now flexing his muscles like an insane bodybuilder. Was there no justice in the universe? Where was God?

I pounded my hand on the coffee table, stomped my feet on the floor, and exclaimed, with extreme elegance, “. . . [imagine a number of words wholly unfit for the pulpit]. And don’t say what I just said, Harry!” Indeed, I felt proud of myself that I had limited my profanity to just these few words. A virtual Zen master of self-control.

Harry, who had been watching me watch the game, asked, “Why do you have to get so mad?” Normally, he would have delighted in an adult’s swearing. But now he was edging backward across the room, the way people will when you have a gun pointed at them. His eyes were wide.

“Because I hate Duke,” I explained.

“Why do you hate them?” he asked.

Here I hesitated. A young boy had asked me a guileless question, and he needed an adult response. “Well, that’s an interesting question,” I told him, channeling Mister Rogers, “and it deserves an honest answer.” I paused for a moment, as I had seen his mother do when addressing an earnest inquiry by her son. Children are our future. We must teach them well, even when it is hard.

“The truth is they are terrible people,” I told him. “Detestable.”

“All of them?” he asked.

“Every last one of them,” I said. “Especially the coach.”

“I hate them, too,” Harry said, settling in next to me on the couch. And thus was born another soldier in the war. On the door of his room hung a chalkboard for self-expression, and I was pleased to note that now, scrawled in his child’s hand (with no assistance or prodding from me) was the unimpeachable sentiment, NO DUKE FANS ALLOWED IN HERE.¹

The book’s title? To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever. Isn’t that the truth? We know who we are because of who we are not. A few weeks ago people tried to tell me that we

are not Packers fans for the most part here at Central, we are Vikings fans. I am serious now. We think we know who we are because of who we are not. We are not communists, we are Americans during the Cold War. Democrats and Republicans here. Sunnis and Shias in Iraq. Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda. Luos and Kikuyu in Kenya. Jews and Samaritans. The Gospel of John states for our information in a parenthetical aside: “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans” (John 4:9).

Ancient tribal differences, with mutual misunderstandings and suspicions. Latent hostility that can, under the wrong circumstances, heat up into all-out war. And sometimes, the closer people live, the more the rivalry builds. The distance between the campuses of Duke and the University of North Carolina? Just 8 miles. So close that the opposing basketball players go to the same barbershops and same churches.

Jews and Samaritans lived even closer than that. Samaria, as you can see on the map on the back page of your bulletin, is a region that lies between Jerusalem and Galilee, where Jesus was from. Now he could have easily avoided Samaria by going north through the Jordan valley and then up into Galilee through the Bethshan gap. But Jesus, the gospel says, “had to go” through Samaria. And as Bible Scholar Raymond Brown notes, as elsewhere in John’s gospel, this expression of necessity, “had to go,” means that God’s will or plan is involved.² But it might not be pleasant. Like wearing a Packers shirt into the Metrodome. So, the first layer of prejudice and suspicion. A Jew goes through Samaria and stops for a drink.

Then we add the layer of gender. Now much has been made in recent years of the differences in how men and women communicate, think, and act. Witness the success of the book, Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus.³ Even today, in our progressive times, I am stunned to realize that there are still some places largely populated by woman, where men seem oddly placed. In our heavily-used neighborhood park, during weekdays most of the people you see are mothers and children. After 5:00, then you see many more dads. But a man walking through the park with a kid on a Monday morning sticks out.

Back in Bible times, society was much more gender separated. There was men’s work, and women’s work. Men were powerful and dominant, while women were largely behind the scenes. Jewish men would say a prayer that went like this, “thank you God that I was not born a slave, Gentile, or a woman.”

Going to the well and getting the water necessary for drinking and cooking and washing – that was women’s work. Women went to the well. Not men. And so the well became a safe place for women to gather and tell stories and maintain friendships. It was a women’s world, there at the well. In our story, a Jewish man goes to the well, and meets a Samaritan woman.

Combine those two layers of demographic differences and you have a result that is nearly complete. In a society governed by purity laws that separated the pure from the impure, Scholar Raymond Brown describes the prevailing rumor that Samaritan women were especially impure. “A Jewish regulation of A.D. 65-66 warned that one could never count on the ritual purity of Samaritan women since they were menstruants from their cradle!”⁴

If that is not enough, there is one final layer of prejudice. Divorce happened, but it was not condoned.

Which now explains why this divorced Samaritan woman was coming to the well at noon. Such a chore was usually done in the morning and evening.⁵ Not at noon, when the sun was hottest. This woman, with an unusual relationship history, purposely came, I believe, to the well at an unusual time.

It is as if she was like someone going back to the gym after a long lay-off. You know how it is. If you are in good shape, you might go to the gym right at 5:15 or so, when it is crowded, and kind of strut your stuff. But when you are not in shape, you go to the gym at odd hours, hoping not to see anyone from work, hoping not to be noticed. That is how it was with this Samaritan woman, going to the well at noon. Not confident, not wanting to be seen, picking the quietest time, away from staring eyes and pointing fingers. Ashamed.

Not a Jew
 Not a man
 Not socially acceptable
 Not accepted
 Not wanting to be seen, she came to the well at noon.

But this time, someone was there. The conversation begins. “Give me a drink,” (John 4:7) Jesus asks. “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” she responds (4:9). Jesus answered her,

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?” (John 4:10-11).⁶

We too have been on the outside. We too have snuck to the well at odd times, hoping not to be seen, but seeking life. We too have been victims of ancient hatreds and rivalries. We too have been conditioned almost from birth to believe that some are in and some are out. Some are pure and some are unclean. Some are worthy and some are not.

Some times we have thought ourselves worthy and looked down on others not like us. Other times we have been the ones who felt unworthy.

Water accounts for about one half to two thirds of an average person's weight.⁷ We have so much in common, but we can scarcely believe it when the living water is offered to Jews and Samaritans. Women and men. Those who are divorced and those who are not.

Come to the well, those who are thirsty
 Come to the well, those tired from divisions
 Come to the well, those who live in shame
 Come to the well, women and men

Come to the well, Jews and Samaritans

For there is living water at hand.

Living water that soothes parched lips.

Living water that restores cells.

Living water that reminds us of what we have in common

Living water that helps us accept each other and ourselves.

Come to the well, and drink deeply of the living water. Amen.

¹ Will Blythe, To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever: A Thoroughly Obsessive, Intermittently Uplifting, and Occasionally Unbiased Account of the Duke – North Carolina Basketball Rivalry (New York, Harper Collins Publishers, 2006) 15-16.

² Raymond Brown, The Gospel According to John I-XII in The Anchor Bible (New York, Doubleday, 1966) 169.

³ By John Gray, originally published in 1993 by HarperCollins.

⁴ Brown, 170.

⁵ Brown, 169. Brown questions whether the hour she goes to the well is linked to the time of crucifixion.

⁶ Brown, 176. “The Samaritan woman could have understood that Jesus was presenting himself and his doctrine as the replacement of the Torah in which the Samaritans believed,” “as two of the expressions used by Jesus, “the gift of God,” and “living water” were used to describe the Torah.”

⁷ Merck Manual of Medical Information – Second Home Edition, Section: Disorders of Nutrition and Metabolism, Subject: Water Balance. <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/print/sec12/ch158/ch158a.html>