

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

March 19, 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 17:1-7

Gospel Lesson

John 4: 5-10

Wesley's 21 Questions – Is Jesus Real to me

What did Jesus look like? Picture the face of Jesus in your imagination. What do you see? Does he have a dark beard, dark eyes, tanned olive skin, high cheekbones, a narrow, handsome face filled with passion and kindness, and in his dark eyes, fire and compassion? Is this how you picture him? Is this his true likeness?

Many centuries ago, an icon of Jesus was painted with these very familiar features. It is called The Mandylion Icon, from the Greek, meaning The Towel. Orthodox Christian tradition claims this icon as the first painting of Jesus.

According to the story, the governor of Edessa whose name was Abgar sent a letter to Jesus asking him to come and heal him of his leprosy. Abgar sent his archivist and court painter, Hannan, to deliver the letter and, while in Judea, to paint a portrait of Jesus. Hannan came upon Jesus in the midst of a large crowd and he tried to draw a sketch but he could not see. Seeing Hannan's need, Jesus asked a disciple for a wash towel. A wet cloth was handed to him. He wiped his face on the towel, then gave it to Hannan. On the towel was the very image of the face of Christ. When Abgar looked at the towel, his leprosy was cured. [Show slide]

Orthodox tradition claims that it was from this Towel of Edessa that the first ancient icon of Jesus, The Mandylion Icon, was later painted, which became a prototype for the faces of Jesus down through the centuries. [Show slide]

The popularity of this icon was due to the fact that people wanted to see the real face of Jesus – they wanted to be close to him - they wanted him to be real in their lives and hearts. Last week, we looked at Wesley's 21 questions that he wrote to engage people in growing deeper in their faith and the first seven of these questions deal with examining our spiritual life/walk with God - with the most important one being – the one that puts the others into perspective – Is Jesus real to me?

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Think about that for a moment. Is Jesus real to you? That is what led to the popularity of this ancient picture of Jesus – because people thought as they gazed on it – it would bring them closer to him. But Jesus is not found in any pictures we create but in our daily relationship that we have with him as his disciples. As we walk and journey with him - that is how Jesus is made real to us. This is how his grace and love and hope are made real and alive in our encounters.

And this is what we see in Gospel lesson as Jesus travels through the region of Samaria to the outskirts of the city of Sychar where there was an ancient well dug by Jacob, Abraham's grandson, and it is here that Jesus rests from the heat of the midday sun. [Show Slide]

And that's when we meet the Samaritan woman. A woman who had been rejected over and over, a woman who had been married five times. Daily she walked to the well – not in the cool of the morning with the other women, but in the heat of midday, alone. Alone with her hurts. Alone with her pain. Alone with her failures. Alone on a raft, drifting on a saltwater sea that does not nourish her, sustain her, or give her life meaning and vitality. Is she physically thirsty? Most likely. Is she spiritually thirsty? Definitely.

How often do we feel like this Samaritan woman – “How many more times do I have to come to this well in the hot sun and sand. Oh, No! There's a man resting against the well. Just by looking at him, he looks like one of those Northern Jews. Oh, great! That means when I get there he probably won't say anything to me. He'll ignore me first of all because I'm a woman, and the Jewish men can be so stupid when they are around women. If he doesn't ignore me because I'm a woman, he'll ignore me because I'm a Samaritan. The Jews think we're a bunch of half-breeds or unpure Jews. Here's the well. I can't believe it! He's actually looking at me!

"Give me a drink."

I can't believe it! He's actually speaking to me! I must ask why. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. You don't even believe in eating out of the same bowls we use."

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"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink' you would

have asked me and I would have given you living water."

I might have known! He's going to make fun of me! He's saying the water from our father Jacob's well is not good enough for him! He wants flowing, running, living water and he knows this well doesn't have that kind of water!

"Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that kind of living and flowing water? Are you saying you're greater than our father Jacob who gave us the well and drank from it himself and his sons and his cattle?"

"Every one who drinks of this water from this well will get thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never get thirsty again; the water that I shall give will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Surely he's mocking me! There is no water that will keep you from getting thirsty again! Who does he think he's fooling? But what if it true? This man sees me for who I am – knows me – could he be giving me a new way to be. "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty!"

It is this encounter with Jesus – this offer to be in relationship - that makes him real and alive for this woman who was in such need. Joanna Williams, a noted speaker, once shared this insight - "I was sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children, a boy and a girl, playing in the sand. They were hard at work, by the water's edge, building an elaborate sand castle with gates and towers and moats and internal passages. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a big wave came along and knocked it down, reducing it to a heap of wet sand. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore away from the water, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle. I realized that they had taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy creating, are built on sand. Only our relationships to other people endure. Sooner or later, the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When that happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh."

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And so whose hand are we holding? For in this time and moment Jesus is reaching out to us, offering us, like the Samaritan woman, a relationship of endless grace, forever hope, and a living love that will never leave us or forsake us. This is the living water of faith we are freely given and can freely receive.

The most impressive geological formation I have ever seen, albeit from a great distance, is the Grand Canyon. What is impressive about it is that this canyon, 217 miles long, 18 miles wide and a mile deep was carved completely by water. Water that rushed through shaping, carving, molding, water that still changes the canyon as well as nourishes the wildlife that exists there.

This force of nature is just like the force of faith in our lives and in the life of the Samaritan woman. As Jesus reveals more and more about her, as he accepts her, as he comes to know her, and shows his love for her, in spite of her gender, her nationality, her religion, her failed marriages, she begins to change. He offers her hope and forgiveness and new life and purpose and just like the water in a canyon it courses through her heart giving her life shape and meaning.

That is what the living waters do for us as well. For Jesus offers us transformation - just as a filter takes in impure water, holds the impurities inside of itself, and gives back only the pure water. It transforms rather than transmits. We see this in Jesus: Like the ultimate cleansing-filter he purifies life itself: - He takes in hatred, holds it, transforms it and gives back love; - He takes in bitterness, holds it, transforms it and gives back graciousness - He takes in fear, holds it, transforms it and gives back freedom; - He takes in pain, holds it, transforms it and gives back peace; - And he takes in sin and regret and brokenness, holds them, transforms them and gives back forgiveness and new life.

This pure water of love and faith that says to us - I know your faults, your flaws, your mistakes, I know you completely and fully and I love you, I accept you. Turn your whole life and give your whole heart to me. For this is the kind of love you can build your life on, you can depend on in any difficulty, and is the love that will sweep over us, seep into us, sculpt us into people who know God's love, who show God's love.

Because, we miss an essential component if we don't embrace the story in its entirety. Jesus offered this woman an opportunity to partake of the living water,

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but it didn't stop there. This kind of water has to be shared. It cannot be hoarded or stored for rainy days because it will become stagnant.

The Samaritan woman was transformed in her meeting and relationship with Jesus who knew her and saw her. And this woman who was broken by her divorces, felt so alone, found such healing and wholeness in and through Jesus that she ran back to share with her community the water of faith she had been given as she invited them to come and drink deeply. As a community of faith, we meet people every day who need this living water. For there are too many people on the margin of life – ready to give up – feeling unloved, unworthy - overwhelmed and lost - people who need to experience through us and hear from us what the transforming love of God is all about. If we want Jesus to be real for us then we need to look for him – where told us to – amongst the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, and those in prison.

And we find this all throughout the Bible – Jesus often went where others told him shouldn't and met with people others disapproved of – Luke 5 – eating with tax collectors – Luke 7 – banquet – woman washes feet tears – “I See you”, Luke 15 – lost sheep, Luke 5 – being with lepers

It is these scriptures that makes Jesus real and alive in my heart and life, that made me fall in love with Jesus and want to follow him, and they form us as a congregation as the body of Christ seeking to show the love of Christ to everyone, everywhere, in all we do.

And so is Jesus real to you? For when Jesus is real to us – alive in our hearts and souls, it changes how we see the world and has an impact on everything – from our words, actions, and priorities. And there is no better way to live this out than to follow where Jesus walks and proclaim as he did that we are all connected and we all have a thirst of one kind or another. So, let us come and proclaim that here is the living water of our faith through our relationship with Jesus Christ. Here is healing for our brokenness! Meaning for us when we're in despair. Purpose for those wandering aimlessly. There is a way to cope and overcome the pain! Come to the well and drink deep. Just come to the fountain, God says. Open your heart and Drink forgiveness. Drink meaning. Drink grace. Drink hope. Drink love. Drink purpose. As we proclaim in prayer today - Fill my cup, Lord; I lift it up Lord;



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Come and quench this thirsting of my soul. Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more. Fill my cup, Lord, fill it up and make me whole. Amen.