



Sermon for Lent 3, 2020 Meeting and Loving Others in a Time We Didn't Expect

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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[Exodus 17:1-7](#)

[Psalms 95](#)

[Romans 5:1-11](#)

[John 4:5-42](#)

Friends, we are in a strange place today, with our churches closed and with us scattered to our homes. Our prayer for this Sunday is about as good a prayer as we could hope to offer today, as we open ourselves to God's word. So, let us open our minds and hearts in prayer.

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Folks, I really wish I could be with you all today, and through the coming weeks! As I am sure many of you feel the same – a desire to gather, to pray, to be there physically to support others.

This is going to test us all. As we watch the steady, speedy growth of cases of the coronavirus, we take to heart how important it is to practice this “social distancing” well. For kids who are now out of school, this means few if any play dates with friends. For adults, this means incredible mindfulness about keeping physical distances from others even while serving them or being served.

These are incredible times for all of us. They are times of high risk, of deep uncertainty. We don't know how it will resolve itself, or when. And, this little, tiny, tiniest of living microorganisms is leveling the playing field for us all, is showing us how little power and control any of us have. We do our best. And we wait. And we pray. And we care for one another.

In the end, that is how we live anyway, day to day. No matter how much control we think we have. No matter how much we take for granted that everything will be fine. There are risks each day and each year and each lifetime to encounter. Some risks are greater and costlier than others. But even so, each day is a gift, and another time to do our best and to trust, to hope, and to care.

This time will test and push us. We can become impatient, like the Israelites became impatient with Moses and with God, murmuring and mobbing as they demanded water. It can be tempting to join in to the cart-clanging, tug-of-war mad rush behavior at the stores to grab for toilet paper. It can be tempting to spend a lot of energy whining with “Why” questions like the Israelites whined at Moses, and like Moses whined at God. It can be tempting to give in to the spirit of desperation – even when we are not yet desperate.

In this time, as followers of Jesus, we will follow a different way. We will step forward each day, in our homes and wherever we must venture, with patience, with trust, with care, and with hope. We will not give in, as tempting as it is, to the urge to demand and grasp and hoard. We will enter this

time of a bit of suffering with hearts open to God, being neighbors to others, praying to God for our daily bread and for deliverance from evil, and daring to love.

And, about suffering... I know this might not be a popular thing to say, but, really, we aren't really suffering yet, most of us. We are *inconvenienced* and are experiencing *some discomfort*. Now, there are indeed those among us who are suffering – people who have lost pay for jobs that have dried up or will dry up as the world around us “hunkers down,” people facing the threat of eviction because their income has gone down when they otherwise squeak by living paycheck to paycheck, and people who are already ill with the coronavirus that is affecting people around the globe.

This little, tiniest of microorganisms is reorganizing and reorienting our lives. Maybe, even as we worry about this as something in the background for all of us, we can also take what we are experiencing as some time of new learning, of forming new habits and ways of living, of rediscovering ways of living that we had let slip away.

I hope we can take this time to allow ourselves to reflect deeply and be shaped in new ways to respond more fully as followers, friends, and servants of Christ Jesus. Because God meets us in the wilderness in our lives – and connects with us in what we need most. Jesus, who is God-with-us, calls us to feed the hungry, give water to anyone who thirsts, give clothes to those who need clothes, take care of widows and orphans and those who are in prison or are the poorest.

Folks, this is what we heard about, all last year, from the Gospel of Luke. And here we are, during this Lent, in a time when a loving Christian presence in the world is so important. Love God, and Love your neighbor like you love yourself – and don't forget, Love yourself!

So, who is my neighbor? Especially in a time like this?

It's the same as always. My neighbor is anyone I choose to be a neighbor to, and anyone who chooses to be a neighbor to me. Even my enemy can become my neighbor, if I choose to follow Jesus on his Way of Love.

I remember people helping each other out in big blizzards and in the aftermath of storms or fires. I remember people coming together to help people survive hurricanes and then to rebuild their lives. We have it within us. We just need to be a bit more creative in a time when we must also respect physical distance between us.

So, this story from the Gospel of John is one of my favorite parts of scripture. It is a beautiful meeting of strangers, who lift each other up. It is natural conversation between two people who dare to step across the barriers that would typically keep them apart. Jesus, the Jewish man, meets and talks with a woman in Samaria. The story begins with Jesus tired and resting by a well, and immediately breaking social rules of separation by talking to her and asking her for something. In that time, in that culture, good Jewish men were not to talk to women, and women were not to talk to men – except for members of their own house. In that time, in that culture, Jewish people thought of Samaritan people as if they were so wrong about their ideas of God and of history that they were defiled, at least as bad as Gentiles. Jesus breaks two social rules here to interact with the Samaritan woman.

Here are two artistic pictures of the scene.



(Christ and the Samaritan Woman, Augustino Carracci, 1580. Engraving)ⁱ



(Jesus meets the woman from Samaria at the well. Engraving.)ⁱⁱ

In the first image, the woman's skin tone is ambiguous – is it darker, or is it lighter? And she is tough, strong, looks like she has been used to handling anything that comes her way. In the second

image, the woman is younger, smaller, perhaps a bit more hesitant in her manner. In both, Jesus is engaging vigorously in conversation, either speaking or listening, and looking right at her.

I like these pictures. Note in both that they aren't touching, and they are outdoors. They are still keeping some distance from each other – although, if the woman had needed and asked for healing, we know that Jesus would have indeed reached out and touched her. And, even though we never get told if Jesus actually got his drink of water, I think that the conversation happened while the woman was actually drawing water from the well, and that she gave him the water he asked for – in a cup she touched.

This is one of my favorite conversations in the Bible. It has this abrupt, “in your face” quality, and with some playfulness and sarcasm here and there. Try reading it with a New York accent – or a Southern accent, or an African-American accent, or a Kentucky country accent, or a Latino accent, or a Russian accent – or with whatever accent was in the community where you grew up?

This is one of those stories in the Bible that I always use when I talk about evangelism. Because evangelism is about listening for and speaking about God's amazing gifts of love, life, and care for us all – and so, evangelism is what happens when we listen and speak honestly and openly with others, and when we let the Holy Spirit lead us into conversations.

So, Jesus is traveling – commuting, very slowly, if you will, on foot – and he is passing through Samaria. It's a neighborhood that the true faithful Jews of the time did not like, because it was the dwelling place of – let me borrow a Harry Potter phrase – the “mud-bloods.” These were the remnant of any of the 10 tribes of Israel who had held on to bits and pieces of the sacred religious traditions of Jewish history, who had intermarried with Gentiles over the centuries, who did not go to Jerusalem and the Temple for worship.

And Jesus sits down at a well. A woman approached. And then, Jesus breaks all the rules. He talks to her – asks her for something he needs. He asks her for something. So begins the conversation. And she joins right in, chatty extravert that she is! From the very beginning, she begins a friendly verbal sparring game with Jesus. And Jesus plays as well – when he talks about offering her living water, there is a word-play where the word for “living” can also mean “running” – running water or spring water. But at every turn, Jesus opens a doorway in the conversation that invites her to consider deeper truths, deeper realities.

What is remarkable in this conversation is how open she is. She is unafraid to talk about matters of life's deep meaning, matters of the heart. “What do you think about where we should worship?” “I know that Messiah is coming.” It becomes clear that God is at work in her – even after we learn the third big thing about her that makes Jesus even more of a rule-breaker: she has hopped from marriage to marriage and is now living with someone not her husband.

And – think about it – she then becomes one of the first evangelists! She runs back to the village to tell people, to invite them to come and see someone “who told me everything I ever did.” She invites her neighbors to consider the question with her, “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

Our day-to-day interactions matter. Even in a time like this. Actually, *especially* in a time like this! Even as we suffer – or, for now, are inconvenienced and experience a bit of discomfort – we continue to grow, and we continue to reach out. As we heard from Paul's letter to the Romans

today, “suffering [and even inconvenience and discomfort] produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us” – and here’s the punchline! – “because *God’s love has been poured into our hearts* through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Let the love flow! Even as we are physically practicing “social distancing,” we still need to go out for food and supplies, to go to work, to go for walks and get out and exercise. And we will meet other people along the way. Let the love flow! Even in our physically cautious interactions, we can extend ourselves with warmth and interest to others. Every day, even in this time of caution, out there – somewhere out there – all around you – all around this place, all around your homes and in your schools and offices and in the parks and gyms and on the road – all around you, somewhere out there, in each person you encounter, God is at work. It is our joyful opportunity to go out and discover – to be a witness to God at work in others – to dare to name God at work in others. And we carry with us our own stories of God at work in us and among us.

So. Think about your own life. Day to day, week to week. Who do you encounter? Who are the people who become your neighbors – even for a fleeting few moments? How can you engage them – full of divinely inspired curiosity, listening for signs of God at work in their lives, open to sharing some of your own story, and ready to name the Holy in their lives?

I invite you – dare to engage your neighbors. Who are your neighbors? Why, as Jesus so clearly and repeatedly showed us, it is anyone. It is Everyman and Everywoman. It is Every Child. It is the stranger in Samaria, in Jerusalem, on the road to Emmaus. It is Jesus on the Road. It is Jesus on the Way to Jerusalem, Jesus on the Way of Suffering and the Way of the Cross. It is Jesus, the risen Christ. Go out to meet him!

Be at peace, dear friends, and be full of hope, and let the love flow, and be ready to seek and serve Christ, even and especially in a time such as this.

ⁱ The Albertina Museum, Vienna. Image posted at https://arthive.com/artists/1513~Agostino_Carracci/works/19607~Christ_and_the_Samaritan_woman.

ⁱⁱ Wellcome Library, London. Wellcome Images images@wellcome.ac.uk <http://wellcomeimages.org> *Jesus meets the woman from Samaria at the well*. Engraving. Copyrighted work available under Creative Commons Attribution, licence CC BY 4.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.