

The Subversive Power of Embrace

Third Sunday of Lent

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Texts: Exodus 17.1-7;
Psalm 95;
Romans 5.1-11;
John 4.5-42

Where do you turn when you go searching for insight? Do you chase down the latest research or turn inward to meditate? I suppose it depends on your situation and personality. But I suspect many of us turn toward people who know more than we do about the subject in question. I know that's one of my first instincts.

We have access to the accumulated wisdom of human kind in ways that would blow our predecessors away. But it isn't only the access to knowledge that is so remarkable. The actual progress we have made in understanding the universe in which live is absolutely astounding. There are new strides being made in medicine, technology, science, and the arts every single day. And at pace that is unprecedented. The capacity for human learning, innovation and discovery is something for us to celebrate.

On the Sunday we heard part of the creation story I talked about the imperative to be fruitful and multiply. If you hear that only on a literal level you might think in terms of populating the planet. In that regard we've becoming too fruitful! But I have for some time heard that imperative as an invitation, a command even, to tap into the powerful, creative life force that is at work in the creation story. We have a role to be stewards of the earth as care takers and a role to participate in the unfolding of creation itself as innovators. There is so much information being discovered and so much understanding that is being developed as skilled people bring their bright minds and hard work to the task of discerning what all this information means. I'm grateful to be a part of a

tradition that honors the pursuit of knowledge as an explicit act of faith. I appreciate being in a congregation that seeks to love God with our minds. I'm glad we take every opportunity we can to invite people out of the pews or into our church life from the community to share what they are doing, what they are learning, and what they are discovering. It makes sense to me that when we are seeking insight, we turn to those who have learned and studied and have much to teach us.

Do you feel a "but" coming? It's not really a "but" --- it's an AND. It makes sense that we turn toward those who have learned and studied and have much to teach us AND there is a shadow side if this is the only place we turn when we are seeking insight. Here's one aspect of the shadow side: if we think that insight can only come through those who are bright and educated and experienced then we run the risk of putting a certain kind of intelligence and education on a pedestal. We are in danger of becoming elitists who only listen when someone has credentials and degrees behind their name.

A month ago the Fish Club was volunteering at the Saturday morning Breakfast program at Western seminary, called Pancakes-R-Us. I was talking with one of the regular volunteers there and he heard we were from Hope Church and he said "Oh that's the elite church in town." Now in all fairness he was tapping his impression of this place from his childhood in the 40s and 50s --- that was a long time ago. And he said it with what seemed like admiration in his voice. But I confess to having cringed when he said it. I tried to disavow him of that idea, we all may have a particular niche but we are people trying to follow Jesus just like every other church in this town. I don't want to be elite...because those who are elite run the danger of missing the gifts of God's Spirit that blow freely through every square inch of God's creation. We run the risk of overlooking the people, the places, the experiences where God's Spirit is alive and on the move.

Our story from the gospel today is a story about just such an opportunity that many might have missed but that Jesus grabbed hold of. We are meant to read this side by side with the story of Nicodemus from last week. We are expected to see the striking and obvious contrasts between these encounters with Jesus. Nicodemus is named, he is a teacher, he is

educated, part of the elite. He comes claiming to be seeking insight and yet comes under the cover darkness out of fear for who might see him, who might overhear his questions. In the end cannot let go of the rigid and structured ways of his thinking to understand what Jesus is telling him about life in God's kingdom and the freedom of God's Spirit to bring new understanding and new life beyond what he had come to expect.

The woman at the well isn't important enough to even have her name remembered. She comes to Jesus in the blazing sun of the mid-day. As I said to the children, he violates every social norm by asking her for water. The elite would probably not have even seen her and if they did, they would have snubbed her. Jesus embraces her; and she him. In the simple request for a drink of water a conversation opens before them. She stumbles in the same way that Nicodemus does. She remains focused on the level of the literal: the water, the well, the physical thirst. I heard someone put it this way: "Jesus meets each of her left brained questions with right brained metaphors.¹" And she goes right there with him. She embraces the hidden depths Jesus is inviting her to wade into.

He starts speaking of God and spirit and true worship and she goes there with him: sharing the theology she had been taught and listening to the new territory he is inviting her to enter. Then they get to this remarkable moment when Jesus reveals to her the first of the "I am" statements Jesus will make in John's gospel. "I am he."² At this, the woman sets down her jug, like the disciples who left their nets, and goes into the city calling on her neighbors to "come and see" (this is the language of discipleship). "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" Someone pointed out in my reading this week the unspoken ending to that sentence is "come and see a man who told me everything I ever done and *who loved me anyway.*"³

¹ I regret that I lost track of where I read this comment. Just know someone else said it first!

² Karoline M. Lewis, *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 2 Lent Through Eastertide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 97

³ Anna Carter Florence, *Feasting on the Word Year A, Volume 2 Lent Through Eastertide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 97

When I look at this story and ask the question of how this woman came to be the first apostle in John's telling of the gospel it strikes me that the opening of insight within her comes from the subversive power of Jesus' embrace of her. As he violated every sense of decorum, as he set aside all the rules and attitudes of the elite, as he embraced this woman as a fellow human being, it opened up a sacred conversation that clearly brought life to him even as it obviously brought life to her and to her village. Can you imagine that all of this might never have occurred if Jesus had looked past her as so many of his elitist countrymen would have done? It makes we wonder how many holy, sacred, life-giving, life-changing conversations and encounters I have missed.

The Rev. Denise Kingdom-Grier is the pastor of Maple Avenue Ministries, one of our sister congregations down town. I had coffee with Denise in the fall and she shared with me the work she is doing for doctor of ministry degree at Western Seminary. It's fascinating work. She traces the way that ministry, especially ministries of outreach, have taken on a different emphasis or attitude depending on which gospel animates the life of the church at any given time. So the missionary efforts of the 19th century are grounded in Matthew's great commission to go and make disciples of all nations. And the social justice movement of the 20th century that still influences many of us today takes its charge from the gospel Luke and the emphasis on the "least of these" whom Jesus calls us to serve. She is looking to ground ministry out of John's gospel.

This how she describes the vision she sees here: "John's aim is different, he reveals Christ as God with us. The gospel of John reveals Christ who meets people in darkness and leaves them more than satisfied but enlightened. When the blind, lame and broken meet Jesus in this gospel they leave with an enlightened sense of self and voice because Jesus doesn't merely give things and services but Jesus gives agency that is the ability to act and speak for one's self in the world."

I'm convinced that she is on to something vitally important. Something vitally important for our ministries of outreach (I look forward to getting my hands on her curriculum when she is finished with this project). But

even more, there is something vitally important for us in these gospel stories from John about how Jesus invites us to hold ourselves in the world.

What it means to be fully embraced by God. What it looks like to set loose the subversive power of embrace in the world. Insight comes from many different places. Let's be sure we aren't missing any.