

If you were to play “one of these things is not like the other” with the gospels, John is the gospel. Each author has their own perspective, of course, but John was written much later than the other three and without many of the same stories that appear in the others. This story is one of those that is only found in John, who is preoccupied with Jesus’ ministry not to mainstream Jews but to those outside the tradition.

No matter which Gospel we read, with Jesus, we can always expect a surprise, and this passage is no exception. Several things are noteworthy in this passage. To begin with, this woman, a Samaritan, had very little position in society. A woman, married five times, living with a man to whom she was not married, in a time in which marriage was the institution that gave you security and social status—she had nothing to offer Jesus except a drink of water. And Jesus, the Jewish teacher, never should have been at that well in Samaria, much less talking to a woman, much less talking to a Samaritan woman.

Since long before Lent, I’ve been mulling over whether or not mercy can be reciprocal, or whether it inherently flows in one direction: from the powerful to the powerless. See, I like rules, I like rubrics, I like

definitions. And Merriam-Webster says mercy is

1 a : compassion shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one's power

2 a : a blessing that is an act of divine favor or compassion (May God have *mercy* on us.)

b : a fortunate circumstance it was a *mercy* they found her before she froze

3 : compassionate treatment of those in distress (works of *mercy* among the poor)

So this interaction between Jesus and the Samaritan woman intrigues me, because it breaks all kinds of rules. The verse right before our reading for today explains Jesus “left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.” Which, of course, is overstating. He could’ve taken a longer, safer route, a choice many other Jews might have made, but for whatever reason he chose to go through hostile territory, to take the risk. Once at the well in this hostile territory, Jesus and the Samaritan woman break all sorts of customs, and in doing so they shatter the definition of mercy that I have insisted upon. Part of the

reason Samaritans and Jews don't really mix and mingle is that Samaritans were a diverse people for whom Judaism and pagan practices had influenced the ways they worshipped (thus her question about where she should worship, and her reference to Mount Gehazim, where her ancestors worship, as opposed to Mount Zion in Jerusalem).

In this passage, it is tempting to hear Jesus' commentary on her relationship situation as a moral judgment, which many pastors do. It is not scandalous enough on its own, I guess. But there are all kinds of reasons for her situation, having nothing to do with anything improper; her husbands have each died, for example—not uncommon in those days. So rather than offering a “Go and sin no more” or something else indicating commentary on her life, Jesus says nothing but the facts—you have been married and the man you are currently living with is not your husband—and the author of John offers no editorial comment either. He just sees her in a deep way. Maybe he sees her desperation, or the hardship of having her worth and value predicated on her marital status. Maybe he sees that she is caught, a victim of circumstance in a system that only values her in relation to the men whose company she keeps. And then, John says, another strange turn: she sees him right

back. “I see you are a prophet,” she says. Thus she asks the question about where to worship, an appropriate question of a prophet who, surprisingly, turns out to be a Jew rather than a Samaritan. Jesus spends the entirety of his ministry trying to be seen in his totality, to the chagrin of religious leaders, people who *share* his faith only to be seen by those who *don't* necessarily share his faith. (Now, let's be clear: John's gospel is the gospel written last, at a time when the early Jesus movement is trying to distinguish itself from traditional Judaism. John is the gospel in which the Jewish people are blamed for the persecution of Jesus, rather than the Roman government. So it stands to reason that John paints a picture of Jesus as a prophet rejected by his own people and accepted by others. But let's just stick to the story as it's presented. I digress.)

Aaaaaaaanyway. My point is, to truly see one another in the complexity of our humanity is an act of compassion and, I think, can be merciful. Or it can inspire mercy. Or it can be the manifestation of us building our mercy muscles. I think Jesus and the Samaritan woman each offered one another a kind of mercy—the kind of compassion and forbearance that allows us to hold another's reality with empathy and without

judgment. Jesus saw all the systems that held this woman, all the ways she was powerless, and yet, she was powerful as she beheld Jesus in his complexity. So powerful was she, in fact, that not only was she one of the relatively few women with a definitive role in the gospel narratives—she was also the first evangelist, the first person to go out and tell about her encounter with a prophet who knew everything she'd ever done.

Because I've known that Webster's definition of mercy was insufficient (at least for our purposes), I've also been thinking about the way Terry describes ancient understandings of mercy—that one person has a need and another has a resource to meet that need. When applied to this situation of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, imagining them each needing to be seen and known, imagining each of them offering the other the modicum of compassion they needed, it seems easy to then apply that to our current situation. We each find ourselves locked into complex systems—from family systems to religious institutions to political and social systems—and one of the ways we practice mercy as spiritual people is to remain mindful of these complex systems and to be vigilant against our own internalized privilege and prejudices. Seeing

one another and hearing one another across race/class/gender/etc. is difficult, and we will be clumsy, but we don't get beloved community unless we learn to practice these skills. And from the practice of seeing one another, we get to practice not only offering but also receiving mercy. From there, we begin to find ways of externalizing that mercy: not only seeing the systems in which we are suspended but naming them as a means of both loosening their power on our psyches and holding those systems (and those who benefit, including ourselves) accountable.

It is this implication and application of mercy that, I believe, has led our congregation to where we now stand, ready to see the complex systems that oppress our friends and neighbors AND ready to hold those systems accountable. As you now know, on Thursday night the Leadership Circle, at the recommendation of the Ministry of Justice and Compassion, voted to be a Level 2 Sanctuary Congregation. Which means that we want to be a congregation that supports the work of Level 1 congregations, which are the congregations that would house a potential deportee. What this means practically speaking is that we are going to be gathering a team of people who are passionate about this,

who have the interest and the capacity, and the group will help discern how we as a congregation are best equipped to provide support. There is a planning meeting today from 2:30 to 4:30 at Bethel AME; Erica Charis and I are definitely going, and if you're interested, let us know.

The Sanctuary Movement has been around since the 80s, and has remained an active ministry along the US/Mexico border. However, it has been gaining traction across the country since 2014. With the recent executive orders, increasingly vicious rhetoric, and an uptick in hate crimes against all kinds of minority groups, the Sanctuary Movement offers us an opportunity to join together with a diverse group of faith communities right in our neighborhood to do the work of justice. We are joining the movement to take a moral stand against rhetoric that claims human beings are "illegal." We are joining the work because we see racism against and economic exploitation of immigrant communities as contrary to the Gospel. In becoming a Level 2 Sanctuary congregation, we not only want to ask for oppressive systems to make room for mercy—we want to be the ones to infuse those systems with mercy. This movement is not about saving every potential deportee; it is about saying, our immigration system is oppressive, dividing families

and putting people at physical, emotional, and financial risk. It is an opportunity to say, we commit ourselves to understanding the lived reality of someone on the brink of a whole lot of insecurity and to crying out for mercy. Last, and perhaps most importantly, we have an opportunity to move that much closer to beloved community. I imagine at the well, “us” and “them” melted away for Jesus the Jew and the woman of Samaria. We have a sister congregation in Iglesia Hispana. And we have Latino/Latina/Latinx persons in our congregation. And we have immigrants in our congregation. We are them; they are us; we belong to each other.

Jesus didn't *have* to go through Samaria. And we don't *have* to do the work of peace with justice. We could choose a safer path. But the beloved community, the kin-dom of God, requires risk. It requires confronting all the systems that tell us to save our own skin, to put ourselves first, that we have earned privilege when it was actually given to us by the color of our skin, by our gender presentation or expression, by our sexual orientation, by our socio-economic status, by our access to quality education, or by any number of other invisible forces that keep us from seeing one another.

Giving and receiving mercy is hard, whether it is within ourselves, between two people, or confronting systems of power. When we see one another clearly, though, we can see where we have resources that can ease the way of another. And sometimes, all we need is a drink of water and a compassionate heart.