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“Engaging Jesus”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

3rd Sunday in Lent

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Ex. 17:1–7; Ps. 95; Jn. 4:5–30

Jonathan Foer, in his book, *Eating Animals*,

begins his story this way:

“I spent the first twenty-six years of my life disliking animals.

I thought of them as bothersome, dirty, unapproachably foreign,

frightingly unpredictable, and plain old unnecessary.

I had a particular lack of enthusiasm for dogs – inspired,

in large part, by a related fear that I inherited from my mother,

which she inherited from my grandmother....

And then one day,

I became a person who loves dogs. I became a dog person.

George (my dog) came very much out of the blue.

My wife and I hadn't broached the subject of getting a dog,

much less set about looking for one. (Why would we, I disliked dogs.)

In this case, the first day of the rest of my life was a Saturday.

Strolling down Seventh Avenue in our Brooklyn neighborhood,

we came upon a tiny black puppy,

asleep on the curb, curled into its... vest like a question mark.

I don't believe in love at first sight or fate,

but I loved that dog and it was meant to be. Even if I wouldn't touch it. ”

(Foer, *Eating Animals*, p. 22)

Foer goes on to say that his attraction to the puppy increased from that moment on. First they took the puppy home and he hugged it... from across the room. Then, when it gave him reason to think he wouldn't lose digits in the process, he started feeding the puppy from the palm of his hand. Next he let it lick his hand, and eventually, his face. And then Foer became a person who loves dogs, who loves animals.

I'm intrigued by people who notice events in their lives like this and can make statements like:

“the first day of the rest of my life was a Saturday”, or
“the last normal day of my life was a Friday”.

I'm impressed by people whose lives can turn on a dime, because of one brief encounter, and that they are aware of it.

Usually, people notice such a turning point, that dime, only when their lives begin to unravel because of a tragedy that tends towards a series of unfortunate events.

But I'm most taken by people whose lives can turn on a dime, *for the better*, because of one brief encounter, and they are aware of it and entertain it as something divine, as something *of God*, as a point of grace. This, I find to be most rare.

Reading the story again of the Samaritan woman and her encounter with Jesus at the well,

I find similarity in the prologues of these two life-changing stories - one about finding a puppy and the other about finding Jesus, or is it about being found, by Jesus?

I might imagine this Samaritan woman saying:

For the first years of my life, I was a good little Samaritan, avoiding contact with all Jews, as I had been instructed by my mother and her mother.

I wouldn't allow myself to be in the same place with them, speak talk with them,
touch them, eat with them, share utensils with them, or respond to them.

It wasn't that I was afraid of Jews,

I just didn't allow myself any proximity that might invoke fear.

Avoidance was my principle coping mechanism.

And then one day, that all changed. I became a disciple.

This Jewish man came to me very much out of the blue;

like all I needed was another man in my life – really.

Frankly, I wasn't looking for the Messiah, either, in any way, shape, or form.

But that day at the well, when I came upon this poor, tired, creature,

sitting there in his “have mercy on me” posture, in the heat of the day;

this chance encounter with this Jewish man,

who referred to himself as “I AM”,

turned out to be *the first day of the rest of my life*.

I can't help but think that our meeting was meant to be.

Could this be the Christ, I ask? I don't know. Come and see for yourselves.

You may think it's odd that I would consider a Samaritan woman meeting

a Jewish rabbi to be anything akin to a man meeting a puppy.

But I am reminded in my reading of another encounter that Jesus has

with a foreign woman, this one Syrophoenician,

as recounted in Matthew's and Mark's Gospels

(Matthew 15: 21-26; Mark 7: 24-31).

In this other encounter, a foreign woman falls at the feet of Jesus and begs, pleads,

pours out her heart on behalf of her daughter, who needs healing.

And Jesus, in a statement that always puzzles me, says that it is not right

to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs;

meaning that he had come to redeem the children of Israel first;

the little dogs – the Gentiles, later.

A Jew of that time would likely refer to a foreigner as a dog;

and perhaps, conversely, a Samaritan, also a Jew.
Furthermore, I imagine that it would almost be as disgusting for a good Samaritan
to let a vagrant Jew drink from her bucket,
as it would be for a cynophobic male to let a dog lick his hand or face.
In other words, the disgust level would be quite high,
which is what makes this encounter between Jesus and this woman
all the more noteworthy.

So I wondered as I read, what made this woman open to encountering Jesus
as the Christ, and not just as another Jew to be feared and avoided?

What made her able to engage him as life-changing?

Well, first of all, she deviates from social custom.

She steps off the treadmill of visiting the well in the evening,
in the cool of the day, and walks to the well, instead, at noon.

This variance of pattern makes her hyper-vigilant, makes her notice the extra-ordinary,
the man sitting, tired, in a have-mercy-on-me posture.

This variance of routine makes all of her senses open to his presence.

Anna Carter Florence says that "true engagement is embodiment beyond thought."

True engagement goes beyond intellectualizing.

True engagement requires that all of our senses be open to the other,
body, mind, heart and spirit.

(Anna Carter Florence. *Preaching as Testimony*, p. 77)

Secondly, she is not afraid to question Jesus.

This Samaritan woman engages him in conversation beyond mere yes and no.

Jesus initiates the encounter at the well, you will notice.

God is the initiator of our encounters with the holy. God relishes this surprise factor.

God likes to meet us right smack in the middle of our ordinary lives,
right smack in the middle of the day or the night.

Our task is to respond to God's initiative; which this woman does.

Jesus speaks the first words to her as a question, "Will you give me a drink?"

The woman, to meet him where he is, adopts his style of conversation,
answering his question with another question,

"How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?"

In all, she asks four, possibly five questions, of increasing theological significance,
the last being the most significant: "Could this be the Christ?"

Questions, I think, are vital in engaging Jesus.

That's why I love the wonder questions we encourage children to ask in Godly Play.

That's why I loved the Pastor on the Hot Seat exercise in confirmation class,

where our PhD pastors came in to entertain the confirmands' burning questions
about faith.

Thirdly, this woman engages Jesus by responding to human need.

This man is alone. He is thirsty. He asks for her help.

This woman ends up meeting Jesus, himself, when she responds to human need.

We don't know if Jesus ever got that drink for which he asks.

But perhaps he was thirsting for something else:

for human contact, for theological conversation of a deeper level,

for a friend of another ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation.

Perhaps simply responding to human need opens the door to engaging Jesus.

That's what Jesus implies in his own words in the parable of the sheep and goats:

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance,

the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For when I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,

I was a stranger and you invited me in,

I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me,

I was in prison and you came to visit me...

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers
and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25: 31-46)

Fourthly, when confronted with the truth about her past,
this woman admits to it; she is not the least bit defensive.

Nor does Jesus either condemn her or forgive her.

He doesn't view these things, this stockpiling of husbands, as sin.
He simply reflects the facts back to her in a non-judgmental way.

It's not a conversation stopper for him; not an impediment to her continued
spiritual growth from this point forward.

On a personal level, this reminds me of the dreaded mid-course assessment,
that was required of all seminarians when I was a student at Columbia Seminary.

Half-way through the program, it involved

a brutally honest evaluation by a faculty advisor, another faculty member,
and peers whom I, the student, had chosen.

My faculty advisor in seminary was Shirley Guthrie, the renowned theologian,
most know for having written the classic textbook, *Christian Doctrine*.

I was scared to death going into that assessment,

feeling that I was going down the tubes as a seminarian,
not because of my grades, but because of other factors
in my life beyond my control.

My father, having died early in my middler year, and the ensuing grief had made it
increasingly difficult for me to engage in my church internship or in any
other large group activities with much vigor.

Most of the time, I just wanted to stay home and hug on my kids.

I decided that the best plan of action at this meeting was

to confess all of that up front, lay it all out for comment,
begin with the bad news and move on from there... which I did.

And after a prolonged silence, Shirley Guthrie looked up and said... "So?????"

It was the biggest and most gracious "so" that I've ever received in my life,
and the conversation moved on from there

to my prepration for following a call to ordained ministry.

It was one of many points of grace in my life.

This also is how I imagine Jesus responding to this woman about her checkered past—
with a grace-filled, long-drawn-out “so”...
and a move towards her future as a potential disciple.

And lastly, this woman engages Jesus through her testimony;

her testimony which comes as a question,

“Could this be the Christ?”

I want my confirmation class to notice this especially;

those of you who have fired your their burning faith questions

at our “pastors on the hot seat”.

This woman doesn't come out of her encounter with Jesus spouting the Apostles' Creed,
or some other declarative statement of faith.

She comes out of her encounter with a statement of agnostic faith:

“Could this be the Christ?”

She doesn't know. She's not sure. She needs the testimony of others

to bolster her newborn faith; the support of a community of faith.

That's where her faith begins.

Emily Dickinson once said that “faith is doubt”.

That's where this Samaritan woman begins her faith journey, with a question,

with a doubt, and with a willingness to leave her bucket and

seek answers to her questions about faith within her immediate

community.

Faith, even agnostic faith, begins small like this, like a tiny seed that fall from a farmer's
sack.

But once it takes root, it engages our whole being,

gets under our skin, into our bloodstreams, and sinks down to the bone.

I was gripped by the tragic story last week in the world news,

about the murder of Sahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's Minister of Minority Affairs,

and the only Christian in the Pakistani Cabinet.

Did you hear about this man?

He was an advocate for the rights of all religious minorities in Pakistan,
and he was gunned down in his car, killed by a group claiming
allegiance to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Bhatti knew that his job was dangerous because he had received numerous threats.

But he said, "I am living for his community and suffering people,
and willing to die to defend their rights. So these threats and these
warnings cannot change my opinion and principles."

I was impressed by the courage of this man, who to the very end
based his whole life on his faith.

He said, "I want to share that I believe in Jesus Christ,
who has given his own life for us.

I know the meaning of the cross, and I am following the cross."

(Michael Gerson. "A Martyr To Foreign Policy". *The Herald Sun*, March 9, 2011)

I don't know how Mr. Bhatti's faith journey began;

perhaps in surprise; perhaps tied up with many questions;

perhaps in response to the suffering of his people;

perhaps in coming to terms with his past; perhaps in agnostic faith;

perhaps all of the above.

All we see is the faithfulness of a man who left his bucket of security
to follow this man Jesus in boundary-breaking, sacrificial love.

Welsh poet RS Thomas speaks of his own agonistic faith
in the final lines of his poem, "The Shadow".

He says:

There is an invitation

we receive, standing outside

the laboratory of the self,

*either go in
and have everything explained*

*or take mystery by the hand
and be led faltering towards the love
that is at the center of its withdrawing.*

Amen.