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“Well-Being”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Third Sunday in Lent (Year A)

March 19, 2017

Exodus 17: 1-7; John 4: 5-42

There is something dark and mysterious about a well, isn't there?

A hole is bored down deep into the ground, and water fills it up, miraculously.

The water is usually out of sight, but you can hear it

if you drop a pebble down into a well.

People drop coins into a well and make wishes, plumbing the depths

in an act of hope.

The Old Well at Chapel Hill is certainly iconic. A sip from the fountain there

is said to bring good luck for the coming year.

In the Old Testament, wells are associated with marriage

as Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and Moses all met their wives at wells.

In these cases, the well seems to connote the presence and blessing of

God, the invisibly mysterious matchmaker.

To fall into a well is usually certain death by drowning.

In Midland, Texas, in 1987, an 18-month old girl named Jessica McClure

fell into an 8-inch well casing and was trapped there for 58 hours

while the world watched and held its breath

as technicians, engineers, and medics from far and wide collaborated

to dig a parallel shaft 22 feet down in order to rescue the toddler.

I remember crying as the bloodied baby was hoisted into the light,

born again to new life.

To be pulled from a well alive is nothing short of miracle.

To meet at a well is to meet at the source of life, or to meet THE source of life,
the One who provides for the well-being of all.

A woman rang the bell at the church door a few weeks ago,
an unexpected neighbor from the streets of Durham.

She showed up unannounced, as neighbors often do, and asked if
she could speak with me, personally, in private.

One of my responses could have been my Oscar the Grouch dismissal:

“Go away. I can’t see you today. I’m too busy.”

After all, I had just returned from a week away of continuing education,
and the McPherson lectureship and Lent were looming on the horizon.

Another possibility could have been my Judge Judy sidestep:

“Well, perhaps you should come back on a Monday or Thursday
when one of our social workers can speak with you.”

That, of course, is judging her totally by stereotype and assuming that her request
might have something to do with money or housing, power or transportation.

Or, I could invite her into the parlor, sit down with her, offer her something to drink,
and listen to what she had to say, which I did.

All of these years of following Jesus do rub off at times.

We sat knee to knee in the musty dusk of the church parlor,

as she pulled an envelope from her purse,

carefully unfolded it, and began to rotate the envelope as she read
a list of requests one by one, which she had painstakingly hand-written
all over the back of the envelope with much care and thought.

“I would like for this church to host a forum,” she said, “where we could invite
members of the Durham Police Department, Social Workers from DSS, and
people off the streets who struggle with drug abuse and addiction,

to see how we can restore them to the community, and put counseling,
pastoral care, and security around them to keep them
safe, clean and healthy.

What do you think?" she said, beaming, after she had emptied out her envelope-vision
for inner city redevelopment right in front of me.

"Wow! It is quite a vision, quite impressive," I said, "a lot for us to think about."
And while I didn't promise her anything we couldn't deliver, I did try to affirm
her honesty, her insight, her dream for the well-being of the community,
and the confidence she had placed in us, First Presbyterian Church,
that we might be the ones to make her vision a reality.

Before she departed, we held hands and had a prayer together,
commending the implementation of her vision to God's care.

And it was as if living water, welling up to eternal life spilled over in that moment,
as we both felt affirmed in our callings to be the people of God.

After our prayer, she stood, carefully folded her dream envelope
and put it in one of her many pockets for safe-keeping, gathered all her bags,
and she said, "Thank you. I feel 'lighter' having talked with you."

And you know what? I actually felt lighter, too, from whatever passed between us.
Both of us left that conversation feeling encouraged, uplifted, called,
and united in spirit by what had transpired between us.

A woman comes to Jesus, too. She shows up unannounced in the middle of the day
at the well of their common ancestor, Jacob, thirsty, like Jesus.

But that is about all that they have in common. Beyond common ancestry and thirst,
they are totally "other" to the each other: male to female, Jew to Samaritan,
traveler out of place to native in the midst of her daily routine.

Nevertheless, Jesus engages her in conversation, which takes her totally by surprise:
he a man and a Jew, asking her, a woman and a Samaritan,
for a drink of water to assuage his thirst.

And she responds by asking him questions, many questions of theological inquiry.
To which he responds with deep listening, with holy listening,
with listening as if one were listening hard for the splash
of a pebble dropped deep into a dark well.

Jesus listens to her not only with his ears, but with his heart, with his
intuition, and with his spirit.

And in doing so, he hears her sighs too deep for words,
her yearnings that cannot be uttered.

He hears and notices that she is alone, that she is at the well at an odd time of day,
that she almost talks too much, as of someone neglected,
someone rarely given a chance to speak, someone shunned, perhaps.

He listens to the emotion in her voice; he observes her color rise and fall as she speaks;
he listens to her deep need and ascertains that she lives as someone
who has fallen into a cultural well, not necessarily of her doing, and can't get out.

Married five times, not married now, but living with a man who is not her husband
could be the result of the ancient social custom of levirate marriage, by which
a widow was given in marriage to her spouse's brother,
and if that husband dies, she is given to marry the next brother, etc.

Widows would be especially vulnerable in this situation,
and she may have been forced into these marriages in order to survive.

But while she might survive, she obviously is not thriving under these conditions,
and Jesus ascertains her neediness and possible shame in his holy listening.

He pays attention to where she is, and offers her the living water of affirmation,

not condemnation. And he refuses to let her drink alone,

as he hears her into well-being and worth as a whole person
and not just as a cast-off, recycled widow.

And I imagine that by the end of their conversation, she also felt lighter,
having spoken with him, having had her human dignity affirmed,
having recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and having been given a
higher calling as disciple and a mission to share his good affirming news.

Anne Lamotte in her new book, *Small Victories*, calls this holy listening and affirmation of the other “welcome,” which has at its core that concept of mutual well-being.

She says, “I’ve discovered that offering welcome helps a lot...

The offer heals you both.

What works best is to target people in the community whom no one else seems to want. Voila: now welcome exists in you.

We want you, as is. Can you believe it? Come on in. Sit down.

Let me get you a nice cup of tea. Would you like a lime juice bar?...

I didn’t know that welcome was a matter of life and death...

It’s called having friends, choosing each other, getting found, being fished out of the rubble.

It blows you away, how this wonderful event happens—me in your life, and you in mine.” (Lamotte, Anne. *Small Victories*, pp. 24-26)

There was a fabulous little story by Steve Hartman on the CBS news a few nights ago, about a high school in Boca Raton, Florida, where some students have formed a club called, *We Dine Together*, whose members, popular students, go out into the school courtyard at lunch time and make sure no student has to eat lunch alone, to make sure no student is thirsty for companionship, and to make sure no student feels that sting of “unwelcome.”

The program was started by a Haitian immigrant, Denis Estimon, who came to this country when he was in the first grade, and endured that terrible isolated undesirable feeling of many lunches alone.

“It’s not a good feeling, like you’re by yourself,” he said.

“That’s something that I don’t want anybody to go through.”

So, with a few friends, Estimon started his club, *We Dine Together*.

And since it started last fall, hundreds of friendships have been formed

between some very unlikely people, as hundreds of students have been woven into the fabric of high school life.

And now, similar *We Dine Together* groups are popping up all over the country. (Hartman, Steve. *On the Road*. "Most Valuable Lesson at One Florida High School Taught at Lunch," CBS News, March 10, 2017)

I was so moved when I watched the segment on the news.

If you've ever been the new student in a school, or the one who drops your lunch tray in the cafeteria, or the one with the strange accent, or the one who is dressed differently or gendered differently, or the one with unusual religious practices, you know how radically life-giving and life-changing it is merely to have someone sit down to eat lunch with you.

It is a modern day woman-at-the-well story, to me, if there ever was one: where welcome is offered to the isolated other, where holy listening is practiced, where someone's dignity is affirmed, and where mutual well-being is the intended goal and the outcome.

And it was not lost on me, that in this particular case, wisdom and welcome are springing up from the words and practices of a Haitian immigrant high school student,

in marked contrast to the recent gush of xenophobia and isolationism issuing from the words and practices of some of our supposed adult leaders.

And I thought of Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom, where strange friendships develop in the animal world

between prey and predator, wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, calf and lion and yearling, *and a little child will lead them.* (Isaiah 11:1-7)

Isaiah's vision of the little child was fulfilled by the birth of the Christ child and embodied as he grew to be the man, Jesus,

who welcomes "the other" at the well and offers living water, welling up to eternal life.

One of my favorite descriptions of Jesus comes from theologian, Rebecca Chopp.

She calls Jesus, the Word made Flesh, "the perfectly open sign,"
meaning that he is perfectly open to God
and perfectly open to neighbor.

"The Word is a Word of Power," she says.

"It is a Word that creates and sustains all other words.

It is a Word that opens up many voices, any of which
can push and challenge and transform the present order...

It is also a bet against all odds that good news

can still be proclaimed, even from the margins."

(Florence, Anna Carter. *Preaching as Testimony*, p. 95)

So, where are the wells of potential living water in our own neighborhood:

at lunch today in Watts-Hill Hall,

at Urban Ministries next door,

at Gurley's Pharmacy down the street,

at JC's Diner on Main Street, where "the food is anointed

and you won't be disappointed,"

at the Farmers' Market, where we actually get to meet the farmers,

at Fullsteam Brewery, during Beer and Hymns,

at the YMCA, with our sweaty friends,

among the staff, teachers and children

at our own First Presbyterian Church Day School,

in our parking lot, or at the bus stops on Roxboro or Main Street?

And how do we practice Jesus-welcome at these places of surprising encounters?

Friends, Jesus gathers us at the font, the fount of every blessing, as disciples,

to celebrate and praise our Triune God, the source of living water.

And then he sends us out as apostles to seek other wells and encounter other people,

to emulate Jesus, the perfectly-open and accepting sign of his grace,
and to work for the well-being of our neighbors.

Come Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace;

Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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