

16th Sunday after Pentecost - September 8, 2024

2 Kings 17:21–28, 41; Psalm 34:1–14; 1 Peter 5:6–11; John 4:7 –29, 39–42

“At the Well”

1. Sometimes, interruptions to routines can throw us off our game
 - a. When I started as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in St. Anne IL, Tracy still had a job at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood, where we had been living
 - i. Our move made her commute go from 10 minutes to an hour and a half
 - ii. So, every weekday, she’d drive up to the South Side of Chicago
 - iii. That meant, of course, having to gas up way more often
 - iv. And there were mornings when, running late, she had to go by the one and only gas station in St. Anne to fill up the tank and head north
 - v. That turned out to be more of a challenge than expected
 - vi. Our one gas station had no way to pay at the pump (way back in the last century!) so one had to go in to pay the cashier
 - vii. But we quickly learned that the gas station was a favorite place for people in the community to connect with one another.
 - viii. When Tracy was in a hurry to get going, it was inevitably then that she’d be in the checkout line waiting for the person in front of her to finish their conversation with the cashier.
 - ix. “How’s your grandma doing? Did her surgery go well?”
 - x. That kind of stuff, which really doesn’t take that much time, but when it’s two or three people in front of you in line chitchatting, and you’re already dreading the traffic backing up on I-57, well, that just makes you anxious and impatient
 - b. Eventually, of course, as we became more familiar with the people in that small town, maybe it was us in line keeping people waiting as we did some catching up with a cashier, inquiring about her grandmother, etc.
 - c. Eventually, also, a second gas station came to town, and both started offering the pay-at-the-pump option. I wonder how many customers still went in to pay...
2. But sometimes, interruptions to routines can also open up a brand-new window on life
 - a. Our gospel passage today, presented beautifully by our young people, offers the story of a woman and a man having a conversation which interrupted the woman’s routine
 - i. The man happens to be Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, or Judean (meaning from the land of Judah) as he’s referred to in our translation
 - ii. The woman happens to be a Jewish person but from the area of Samaria, who was going to the well just outside of town to get water for herself and her household
 - b. Culturally, there was not supposed to be any interaction between the two. This should have been a non-event, but it became a life-changing event
 - c. First some background

- i. To get from the south to the north of Palestine, Jesus chose to take the path that went through the land of the Samaritans. He didn't have to. He could have gone around.
- ii. Jesus arrived at this village and had sent the disciples into town to get some food, and he decided to stay out on the outskirts, at the village well, to wait for them. It was noon.
- iii. And that's when a woman from the community came to draw water, something she did daily which she wasn't expecting would take long, let alone turn into a theological conversation.
- iv. Jesus talks to her and asks her for a drink of water.
- v. She is shocked that she even asked her a question:
 - 1. Jews from Judea and Samaria didn't get along. No, they hated each other.
 - 2. Conflict went back centuries, and it had to do with fights over land, differences of how to worship God, and what soccer team to root for (well, no, not the last part).
 - 3. Each group named Jacob as their ancestor. They saw their own interpretation of holy writings and tradition to be the only true one.
 - 4. Unaccompanied, unrelated women and men were not supposed to talk to each other.
- vi. Oh, and one more thing which is not obvious to our modern ears.
 - 1. To the original listeners, this story sounds a great deal like the beginning of a love story.
 - 2. Are you surprised? It sounds like the passage in Genesis 29 when Jacob first met Rachel at this well (according to tradition), and Rachel would eventually become his wife.
- vii. And that just barely covers the beginning of the conversation!
- d. The Samaritan woman had gone to get water, and hadn't expected a theological conversation
 - i. what you may notice is that she stands her ground, that she is a faithful and knowledgeable person
 - ii. Though initially the interaction is about physical water, Jesus pivots to speak about a spiritual living water ("living water" that was also how they referred to "flowing" or "running" water, thus her confusion)
 - iii. What he is offering her (and eventually her people) was a way to connect with the true fountain of God, which gives eternal life and satisfies without end. And who, incidentally, both "sides" knew and worshiped.
 - iv. She presses Jesus on the conflict between her people and his people over where it was the right place to worship God – and Jesus bridges the gap between them and says those details are falling away.
 - v. She affirms her faith by saying that when the Messiah comes all will be made clear

- vi. And here Jesus, in the only time he affirms his identity to another person, says to her: I am (meaning I am the Messiah). And by the way “I Am” is one way in which the name of God was interpreted to be: the Great “I Am”
 - e. What she does next says even more about her as a person.
 - i. She goes and tells others about Jesus
 - ii. “He’s told me everything I’ve ever done” she said, in reference to the fact that Jesus had known about her former husbands
 - iii. “Could he be the Messiah?” she asks, already knowing he was.
 - iv. And the people came to believe in Jesus both because of her testimony and then also because of their own personal experience with him.
 - f. They hadn’t started the day thinking: today we meet the Messiah, but they did.
3. Consider where God may be interrupting our routines to offer us a new perspective on how God wants to be a part of our life
- a. Maybe God interrupts us when we’re grocery shopping, and we stop to consider who worked in the fields to pick this fruit or vegetable
 - i. It may come from a family farm and it was picked by machines
 - ii. Or it may come from a large corporate farm and it was picked by migrants
 - iii. And in fact, that could have been in this country or one across the globe
 - iv. But if God interrupts us then and there, maybe we can ponder how we are connected to those unnamed workers who help feed us.
 - v. God’s interruption forces us to look beyond our privilege, and ponder what we do as individuals and as a community to treat those workers with respect and pay them a living wage so they can afford their own grocery shopping
 - b. Maybe God interrupts us at work or at school, when it would be so easy (convenient even!) to make assumptions about people, which just keeps us apart
 - i. We could be missing the common emotions when we grieve loved ones
 - ii. We could be missing the common values when we advocate for our kids
 - iii. We could be missing the common faith we share, but which may be expressed differently on Sundays (or potentially on another holy day)
 - iv. God’s interruption forces us to look beyond our stereotypes or political hangups, and ponder what we do as individuals and as a community to strengthen our common bonds not from a perspective of fear and isolation, but from a mindset of love conquering all
 - c. There are walls which separate us, walls we’ve built or someone before us built and we take for granted as immovable
 - i. Our gospel story concluded with an unlikely two-day layover on their trip north with Jesus and the disciples staying in that village
 - ii. The Samaritans softened. The Disciples softened.
 - iii. Former enemies shared in common hospitality because they had been able to see past their differences to recognize their commonalities
4. It can be destabilizing to have a routine disrupted, but it can also be centering and empowering. Consider where God is disrupting our routines so as to shake us loose from what holds us back and open us up to living into how God would have us live. May it feel to us like a refreshing fountain of living water bubbling up in our hearts.

Sources:

Wisdom commentary. Luke 1-10.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-45-42-6>

Reflection questions

1. Share a story when an encounter surprised you and changed your opinion about someone.
2. In John 4:7 –29, 39–42 Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman. What was she hoping for in the exchange? What was Jesus hoping for?
3. What is one division in our community you wished could be mended? What would it take?