

## **“The Encounter”**

August 1, 2021

*Quest: Travel as a Spiritual Act series*

I asked for help on Facebook again this week, but with a more pointed request. I offered the quote that you have on a card in your bulletin: *Strangers are friends we have not met yet*. And then I asked, “Is there a story where this rings true for you?”

I heard from our church family about being new to Lake Harbor and finding strangers who quickly became friends. I heard about the power of music to bring people together on a bus headed to Louisiana for a mission trip, and from someone who went with a small group of people she didn’t know to serve in mission in Russia. She wrote, “We were there to represent Jesus but found him in each other.”

Two seminary friends wrote about the experience of meeting each other in the registration line – one more introverted and one more extroverted who proclaimed that they would be friends – and they continue to be very close. One of my classmates reminded me that we were from different places – Michigan and Louisiana (he has the accent; I don’t). We forged a lasting friendship because of our faith in Jesus.

A colleague wrote about how a simple smile can make a connection, and she added the experience of sharing family stories to welcome her children-in-law into their family. The poignant example, though, was about a priest who was gracious in offering hospitality when her son died suddenly, and the priest has continued to stay in touch. That encounter made a lasting impact and offered comfort in a time of deep grief.

My sister wrote about the kindness of a stranger who came to help when she, my parents, and my young nieces went to the U.P. They had car trouble and were stranded at a gas station on the weekend. A man drove in on a motorcycle, saw their predicament, asked the store owner for some tools, and spent more than an hour working on their vehicle – and had worked on the assembly line for just that type of van. They recognized what a blessing this man was, and my youngest niece said, “And he had long hair, just like Jesus.” My older niece (now almost 27) commented on the story: “I remember that day vividly and thinking how at the age of 9, it felt oddly divine for him to show up.”

I wonder if that’s how this woman felt when she encountered Jesus at the well. This is one of my absolute favorite passages in Scripture. Every time I read it, I realize that Jesus is always challenging us to get up and go out – and encounter something and someone new – unfamiliar, and maybe even someone we already have an opinion about. It’s a reckoning passage because we have to deal with our own stuff - our assumptions about others and how others view us (or we assume they view us!).

**SHOW SLIDE:** *Recall a time when you were in unfamiliar surroundings. Were you excited to meet someone new? Or did you have uncomfortable or fearful feelings about an encounter?*

We gather from the conversation between this woman and Jesus that she's got quite a reputation. It's a small detail, but the time-of-day matters. She comes to the well at noon - in the hot sun - the hottest time of day - because no one else will be there, and she won't have to deal with the looks and whispers and gossip. At noon, when it's deserted at the well, she can just get the water and go!

She'll carry the water back to her home in the heat, but it's better than being around the other women who mock her because she's been married many times. According to her culture, she's got nothing to show for her life. She's an outsider among other Samaritans, too.

Gospel writer John says outright that Jews and Samaritans didn't have anything to do with each other. One thing they didn't agree on was where they were supposed to worship God. Even the fact that Jesus is going from Judea through Samaria to get to Galilee wasn't the usual. Geography matters, too.

Samaria is sandwiched in-between Judea to the south and Galilee to the north, yet most Jews would bypass Samaria and double their time to avoid going through it. They didn't want to set foot there. Can you imagine avoiding any place because we're fearful – whether that fear is legitimate or not? Many times, it's not.

And, Jewish men weren't supposed to talk to women in public, especially women they didn't know. So, this Samaritan woman is both an outcast and an enemy. Jesus shouldn't be anywhere near her, but he is. He shouldn't talk to her, but he does. And face it: it's downright improper and unexpected when Jesus asks her for a drink: "You're a Jew. I'm a Samaritan. Why are you asking me for a drink of water?" She knows that by Jesus asking her for a drink, he risks making himself "unclean" according to Jewish culture. Sharing a cup was and is an intimate thing to do. This past year has made us think about all of that.

Jesus has the upper hand here, but he doesn't use his power to strong arm this woman. He really does meet her where she is - even though it's a major risk for him to take - and finds a way to help her realize that she has something to offer. He asks for a drink of water - and remember, this is a man who has already turned water into wine! (Why is he asking her for a drink?)

It's not just about who he is and what he can do for her. She is important to him and to God. He is physically thirsty, and she can meet his need for water. She is spiritually thirsty, and he can give her living water.

That phrase "living water" makes me think of an opposite image. There was a

pail that sat under our downspout to catch the run-off from the roof. That rainwater would sit there and turn all kinds of shades of green. We used it to water our flowerbeds, but it wasn't fit to drink.

But living water is different – clear, refreshing, ready to use. Jesus offers the image of a spring that sustains us. And living water is something we don't keep to ourselves, but something that we share so that others might know its power. Living water shows itself in the assurance of God's love for us no matter where we've been or where we are. It will sustain us as we walk with God into the future. And it's not just for us alone – but for all.

This woman is open to receive Jesus for who he is, even as religious leaders question him and feel threatened by him. Many times, it's the most unexpected person who is open to hear Jesus. This woman is waiting for the Messiah to come - and I imagine that the promise of someone to bring redemption is welcome in the midst of her life. She's humble and able to hear Jesus - and quick to respond!

It's worth noting that she leaves her water jar (it would be gone!), goes back home, and tells people what happened. She could've kept it to herself. She could've decided that she wasn't going to share this good news with people who had been so mean and cruel to her, but she does!

She becomes an effective witness to who Jesus is and what he can do, and Jesus reaches more people because of her. Lives are changed because both Jesus and this woman are willing to have this encounter.

This encounter reminds us that Jesus will break every boundary we attempt to create. He will always go to where we don't want to go, where we're uncomfortable, where we're unsure. That's where we find him - making conversation, talking to someone who didn't expect to have any conversation with anyone, and offering God's love that has been denied her! The psalm we heard today describes a *just* God who looks out for those who need it most. Jesus will create safe space for everyone, and we have to be about that work!

It's not up to us to figure out who's in or who's out of God's circle. We just need to draw it wider, and let God work. We're not called to be the ones who make God's calls on others' lives. Instead, we'd do well to look at the barriers we've constructed and work to break them down – whether it's about race, class, nationality, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity, social status, or any other barrier that we put up when it comes to God's love. That's the work that Jesus is about - and the work we're called to do.

Only when we get “close up” do stereotypes or assumptions about those we consider so “different” fade away. God's grace is not something that we disperse. It's

not ours to give and was never ours to give. It's a gift we've been given; it's ours to share, celebrate, and give thanks for.

Jesus and the woman at the well and all of the stories people shared reminded me that so many times we start out as strangers and become friends. I don't think about it a lot, but just a few years ago, most of you were strangers to me, and I was a stranger to you. We come together with a connection in Christ, but making that step from stranger to friend is an important one. And it's in those moments when we realize that God's desire is for us to be connected – to know God's presence in each other.

I invite you watch a short clip where travel guide Rick Steves talks about "Breaking Bread." **SHOW MEDIA**

I found myself convicted when Rick Steves talked about slowing down to truly enjoy a meal, share a meal with others - to savor it and connect with others. Sharing bread – companion – is a part of our faith heritage. Jesus shared water with this woman. He shared bread with those who were on the road to Emmaus. Mealtimes can be sacramental - holy times - to connect.

**SHOW SLIDE:** *Have you ever shared a meal with strangers and found yourself becoming friends?*

Perhaps Holy Communion can remind us that Jesus invites us to the table together - to come together. And it's a celebration of a sacrament – a time when Jesus called his friends (who had been strangers) and offered them a meal, but offered them himself. Breaking bread and sharing the cup at the table was the vehicle Christ used to demonstrate this most sacred bond and to show his disciples how they would continue to seek peace and love one another. It's still true for us: "Whenever you do this, remember me."

We're invited today to the table that Jesus sets. Do we want Jesus to walk with us? Come to the table, for Jesus is here! We gather at his table to receive food for the journey...