

March 12, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts: Exodus 17:1-7, Romans 5: 1-11, John 4: 5-42

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*In Christ there is neither male or female, slave or free, Jew or Greek. All are one in Christ.*

This is an early hymn of the church, and it's around four hymns that the New Testament gathered. Paul is using this hymn to get at the core of our faith and practice. Distinctions between men and women? Yes. Do they make a difference in our value? Absolutely not. How's that for being ahead of the times of sexual identity, and gender, and all the questions we're raising today! They don't make a difference before God. It's only two thousand years ago for him.

I used to work the Night Ministry in the Tenderloin of San Francisco, 10:00 at night 'til 4:00 in the morning, and I always wore a [clerical] collar. During the course of the evenings, throughout the years on numerous occasions, sometimes women of the night, and some men of the night, would engage in conversation, and they would go in all kinds of directions. I also had a nice full beard in those days--the color, I remember, was black. It tended to cover up that collar until the moment when the woman or fellow would see that collar--they always had a religious experience. *Holy [!!!]* (Fill in the blank.) Yes, sometimes that concluded conversations, other times it preceded [them]. I share that because that's the spirit of this story about the Woman at the Well. You may know, the women would draw water at dawn in the cool part of the day, when the community could gather. What is she doing out here at midday? Ahhh. She's being isolated; she has no business hanging out with the rest of the women in town.

There's this beautiful encounter. Jesus is tired. He says, "I need something to drink."

She says, "You've got no dipper, no bucket. What are you talking about?"

He says, "I'm really thirsty. Can't you give me something?"

She says, "Are you crazy? If I touch you, I am contaminating you--you become ritually impure.

It takes you weeks to recover from this, and then who gets blamed? Me. I'm not that crazy."

Jesus says, "If you only knew, if you just knew who was asking, you'd be asking me."

Now John loves this in the Gospel stories--to show the hidden inner meeting of what's really going on. And here's a spoiler alert. You'll be hearing this theme throughout the whole season of Lent--the inner spring, the inner source, the inner wisdom, the inner connection--that's where it's at with God. *Are you connected?*

"Do you want some of this 'living water'?"

She says, "Well, if it saves me trips to the well--sure."

So, he says, "Why don't you invite your husband? I-I-I've got none."

"You are right--five of them--this one isn't yours."

"You must be a prophet!"

And he speaks to her most deeply. *"We disagree. You Samaritans say it's here, in [Mt.] Gerizim. Jews say it's in Jerusalem. But, friends, where it's really happening in the worship of God is with our lives, worshiping in Spirit and Truth. That's where God is to be found- wherever there is Spirit and Truth--there is God."*

You know, Jesus breaks through every possible boundary and border to gather the lost, the outsiders, with him. Always breaking through numerous times. Throughout his ministry, he's accused of being possessed--and a Samaritan, *'You know what they're like.'* Every time in the Gospels, Jesus denounces those who accuse him of being possessed. "I am not!" But, not once, does he say, 'I'm not a Samaritan.' *'Go ahead, call me that if you would--outsider, woman, loser, immigrant. Yeah, these are the people I'm hanging with.'*

People got serious about that [Samaritan] accusation. So, in the story, the disciples then return, and there's no way to describe this, they go into shock. What is he doing--talking with a woman like this in broad daylight? Has he lost his mind? Has anybody else seen what's going on here? The word in the text is they were "thunderstruck". But this is close as we can get to it. This is way beyond dumbfounded; they weren't appalled, they were thunderstruck. *Why do we keep forgetting who Jesus is?*

We are being deluged by storms these days, aren't we? We thought we were done in January. It is raising havoc again. *(Lord, have mercy on those who need it in these times of trial!)* But what we really need, friends, is 'living water' because we are drowning in lies which just keep getting bigger and bigger and bigger--the lies that people put into the public eye, the lies of government and media, lying to each other, lying to themselves, lying to us, lying in social media. This is how Fascism works. You get so tired of fighting it--endless lies--so that you can't even tell anymore if you're lying or not. What we need is to drink deep of that 'living water', so our lives are being lived from Spirit and Truth. That's the only thing that can lead us through.

There are two, stunning, spiritual gems in these other texts for today--Moses striking the rock, water gushing out for the thirsty people in the desert. You know that this is the most frequent symbol in the art of the Catacombs--the Striking of the Rock--which the early Christians understood to be Christ. Strike that 'Rock', the spear in the side, pouring out the 'living water' of mercy and truth and compassion, no matter what.

And the other, more than a note from Romans chapter 5, is this verse which might just be the entire Gospel-- *While we were yet helpless, while we were blind and thirsty and drowning in lies, Christ, it says, died for the godless.* It's probably better translated *'Christ was murdered for the godless.'* And that's us. Can I get an Amen? Yeah, the godless ones, lost, thirsty, searching--that's us.

And this is the Gospel--because Christ is always moving towards us. It's not about how close to perfection we come. *'All the improvements you've made this past week. I know, I know there's more than 17 of them...You people are amazing!'*

Christ, always moving to us to infuse us with that Living Water that we might come to true life, having been reconciled with God, we can now reconcile with the not only one another, but the outsiders, of those who don't count, that the body of Christ might be made whole.

Well, Jesus was a radical egalitarian, radical--he didn't just believe men and women were equal--he acted so that men and women were equal. His behavior in those times was considered shocking. It was scandalous--traversing Galilee with women in his company. The only interpretation was 'They're all a bunch of whores!'

Yeah, it's obvious. 2000 years ago he taught women, he encouraged them to become wise, knowledgeable, to act on what they believed. And he defended women in public, and, the first people to convey the Resurrection story are women. This is scandalous, but it's right at the heart of the Gospel-- "*In Christ, neither male nor female.*"

Sometimes, St. Paul gets a bad rap for putting down women. Wrong--that's the next generation! Here's a very brief summary of all that Paul did. He considered women prophets and leaders--for instance, Chloe in Corinth, right? You remember Chloe--and Phoebe, Cyngachria and Aphia in Colossae, Euodia and Syntyche at Philippi, Lydia, the dealer in fabrics, who financed his journeys. Junia, who was an emissary apostle--the word Paul uses of himself. 'Prisca and her husband', he says, 'are my fellow workers who risked their necks saving my life.' There's also 'Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, who toiled with me in great effort.'

Some women are even hailed as 'heads of household', which would mean that they were hosts for the Agape meal, what we now call Eucharist. Agape means the love feast. Well, I think we should bring that one back, don't you? It's a love feast Stirring it up, so people don't forget that they are loved in every ounce of their being.

Look at your bulletin cover. This is St. Priscilla of Rome, breaking the Eucharist bread, with six other women at the Agape table. It's in the Catacombs, it was happening, and the early Church was...thunderstruck. Some years later, we said, '*It's men only who qualify. It's too much, it's too much for the Church.*' And so, we helped put women back in their place. Frightening--isn't it--our roots and where we come from.

It's International Women's Day this week. How come we don't need an International Men's Day? (Because we all know how men work, yeah.) Iran--killing torturing imprisoning. And now--oh that wasn't enough--now we're poisoning adolescent girls. In Afghanistan, women don't count anymore for anything--they don't need an education; they just don't matter. And in Texas this week--5-6 women with miscarriages--now suing the state of Texas, because when they needed help, they couldn't get it. '*You don't qualify unless you're dying*' as a woman in Texas. Men don't see women's health. We just make up laws. '*We don't have to look at the whole picture. What do women matter anyway?*' And you women know far more about this than I do.

It's time for that radical affirmation of women again--and that radical integration of all of us--as people of God, because we can't be people of God without each other. It's time to explore those incredibly beautiful dimensions of who we are, and which have yet to emerge. Those are called Resurrection stories--when we begin to manifest who we are at our deepest, soulful, realm. That's what it is to '*worship in Spirit and Truth*'--and we are called to do so.

Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ, Jesus. Amen.