

March 19, 2017
John 4:5-42
Lent 3A

**I've knelt down to look him in the eye.
My hands hold his in a gentle but assertive grasp.
I need him to look at me...look me in the eye as I speak.**

**I quietly will him to not worry about the toy he just dropped,
Not to regard what his sister or the dog is doing,
And for goodness sake he should quit trying
To look around my shoulder at the TV,
Paused in the middle of his cartoon.**

**I look into our son Owen's icy blue eyes
And invite him to think about the choices he is making.**

**It's not a good choice to hit your sister.
Look at me!
We don't throw blocks.
Owen, look at me!**

**His eyes reach mine at last,
And the stern gaze aimed his direction
Seems to get the point across,
And we are freed from hitting and throwing,
At least for the next 10 minutes.**

**I don't really know why I ask that he look at me.
Perhaps it is good manners taught to most people,
Perhaps it is to redirect a child's attention
To what really matters in that moment.**

But I guess at the end of it all, what I really want
Is for Owen and me to have a moment together:
A moment of clarity and learning,
Of boundaries and respect
Of trust, of forgiveness, of love.

And beyond words just floating into the air,
Looking into each other's eyes seems to cement that moment,
Not only physically, but emotionally,
Spiritually even.

Leave it to a pastor to spiritualize "a good talkin' to,"
But I don't think the experience will be lost on many of you:

For perhaps we all have had those moments in any part of life
When looking someone in the eye
Adds a whole new kind of depth
To whatever kind of conversation is going on.

The intimate connection of people looking at each other
Adds a dynamic that is lost in mass communication.

The voice at the department store announcing 10 minutes to closing.
While innocuous enough, doesn't really care deeply
About the individual shopper purchasing a last minute gift,
And social media has given us the self-inflating pride
Of a self-curated but barely listening audience.

No, when someone looks you in the eyes these days,
It is serious, it is important.

It is a moment of truth-telling:
"Look me in the eyes and tell me..."
"Look me in the eyes and listen..."

**I wonder what Jesus saw when he looked into the eyes
Of the Samaritan woman by that well?
Perhaps more critically, I wonder what she saw
When she returned his gaze with her own?**

**They certainly both saw a prejudice,
Not of their own making, perhaps,
But one acknowledged nonetheless.**

**They both saw vulnerability in the other:
A road-weary, thirsty foreigner,
And a marginalized woman collecting water alone
During the hottest part of the day.**

**And after the woman's initial surprise,
Jesus invites the dialogue between them by
Recognizing his own vulnerability, asking for a drink,
And allowing the woman to exercise some power over him,
She is the one with the bucket after all.**

**It is fantastic irony of the highest degree:
Here is the giver of living water, thirsty himself.**

**Here in John's Gospel,
"A thirsty Messiah and a resourceful woman
Will quickly find out that they need each other."¹**

¹ Osvaldo Vena https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3189

**And thus the conversation begins: a conversation between equals:
Jesus unafraid to break social norms,
The woman unafraid to dive head first
Into the deep questions of faith,
Doubt, confusion, and hope.**

**We watch in their back and forth
As the woman grows in her understanding of the Messiah.**

We watch as Jesus expands the inclusive scope of God's Kingdom.

**We watch as the woman returns to her village
And tells others what she has experienced.**

**We watch as the disciples learn of the
Increased sized of their mission field.**

**We watch as the villagers
Turn their hearing...into sight...into faith.**

**And as we get to the end of the narrative
We ourselves see that a simple conversation by a well
Changed a great many lives.**

**We ourselves see...that looking into the eyes of the Messiah,
Experiencing the presence of Christ,
Will never leave us the same.**

**This is what holy conversation does.
It changes us.**

**Holy conversation is conversation in which mutual vulnerability
Is not targeted or taken advantage of,
But rather cherished as a gift.**

**A risk each one takes, of being known, of being seen.
It is about asking questions like the woman's,
Not with expected answers or with opinions formed,
But because it strengthens relationships.**

**It is why we are having holy conversations
About racism here at Grace.**

**Because it is time for us to be vulnerable about
About our own stories of race and privilege.**

**We need to ask genuine and honest questions
Because we don't have all the answers,
And perhaps too many opinions to bear.**

**We remember that, like the woman at the well,
We are transformed by our interactions
With one another and with God.**

**We are not left the same as we were before.
We don't know the next steps until we arrive,
But we do know that we are no longer alone on the way.**

**The living water that gushes up in our lives
Refreshes and renews our conversations, our relationships,
Our love for the people like us, and not like us:
Boundaries and borders torn down.
Stigmas and prejudices cast off.**

**Like any meaningful conversations, these take time.
They take time because there will likely be
Moments of misunderstanding.**

**The Samaritan woman is first confused by Jesus' responses,
But she does not let that halt the conversation.**

**She asks more, she learns more.
And Jesus is willing to hang in there.**

**Jesus is willing to keep on listening.
To keep on exposing God's heart
So that it can be seen for the abundant love it holds.**

As such she, and we, are changed in the process.

**"The woman at the well goes from shamed to witness.
From dismissed to disciple.
From alone to being a sheep of Jesus' own fold."²**

**Come and see.
A fantastic irony of the highest degree.**

² Karoline Lewis <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=4839>