

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X8
Last Epiphany (Year A) 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m. & 6:00 p.m. Eucharist
Sunday 19 March 2017

Exodus 17:1-17
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

The Most Dangerous Place on Earth

"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (Jn. 4).

When you have nearly everything, do you come closer to realizing that having everything isn't nearly enough? Lindsey Lee Johnson's 2017 novel *The Most Dangerous Place on Earth* takes on this question, perhaps unconsciously. Can you guess the most dangerous place on earth for her? It is a Marin County public school.

Students there live surrounded by stunning natural beauty with brilliant celebrity parents and all the luxuries you could imagine. They simply cannot understand what it means to be poor, to not have the absolutely finest material things. But they also experience extraordinary pressure to succeed. To them all love seems conditional or simply controlling. So they use drugs and alcohol and massive doses of cynicism to numb the pain.

In eighth grade an odd boy who likes to wear yellow sweatpants named Tristan writes a love letter to a girl. In it he says I really see who you are.¹ She shows the letter to her mean best friend, who gives it to the most popular boy in school, who puts it on Facebook. Intense bullying leads to a terrible tragedy.

The book then skips ahead in time to follow a different character each chapter as the students finish their last two years of high school. Let me read you a section to give you a sense for it. "At seventeen, Abigail Cress knew she wasn't beautiful... She believed unprettiness was something to atone for, so she made herself an A student, track captain, president of the Valley High Chapter of the National Association for Women, editor of the yearbook. She enrolled in Mr. Ellison's class to prep for the June SAT, and on weekends wrote out... flashcards for... vocabulary words."²

Before long Abigail and Mr. Ellison, who was also her faculty advisor for the yearbook, are exchanging text messages. One afternoon in February he takes her up to the clock tower to research a yearbook article on the school's history. "Students weren't usually allowed up there, but she was an exception." In those close quarters she could smell his cologne and feel the heat of his body. As they embraced, "[h]is heart was kicking at her ear. It was a human heart. Not a teacher... It belonged to her."³ This was the beginning of their affair.

We understand how this abuse of an adult's power and a teacher's authority can take away someone's childhood and cause permanent damage. We can see how that clock tower is a dangerous place.

When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, that too is a dangerous place. The context, the background assumptions of these people are not immediately obvious. It takes work to get to the meaning. On almost every Sunday I try not to simply repeat the

gospel. I preach as if you have already paid careful to it. But this morning I want to explain the context of this story more carefully.

Mark Stanger told me this week that the dialogue between the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well is the longest one in the New Testament. My friend Donald Schell believes that John is the best storyteller of the four gospels. John does not waste a single word or detail. John even includes physical gestures that will move our hearts.

The other gospels feature the story of the Transfiguration, the mountaintop moment when God calls Jesus his beloved son. John does not have this story. Instead his whole Gospel occurs in this kind of electric moment and shines with this light. The point is not to produce what we would call first century news or to give an historical account. The point is for you to receive a gift.

Jesus says to the woman, "if you knew the gift of God and who it is [speaking to you] you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (Jn. 4). Quite simply John wants you to receive the gift of God's spirit.

So we begin in that dangerous place. In Biblical stories when a man and a woman, like Jacob and Rebecca, meet at a well we know that the encounter is likely to end in marriage. But there is something terribly wrong here. In the ancient Middle East getting water was a social affair that happened in the cool of the morning or evening. Women would engage in happy conversation and enjoy each other's company.⁴

But in this case the events happen at mid-day and the Samaritan woman comes alone. We do not know if she has been ostracized or shunned by the others, only that she is isolated.

Just by asking for a drink Jesus abruptly shatters this aloneness. Although the center of worship for Jews is Jerusalem and for Samaritans it is Mount Gerizim, the two groups share the same stories. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the first five books of the Old Testament have authority for Samaritans. In fact they regard themselves as the biblical Joseph's ancestors. At the same time they are all too conscious that orthodox Jews treat them like outcasts. For a pious Jewish man this Samaritan woman would have been regarded as doubly unclean and impure – both because she is a woman and a Samaritan.

I don't know if the Samaritan woman felt grateful to no longer be alone, but she was certainly surprised. Today we experience so many similar boundaries between people of different cultures, between red states and blue states. Jesus does not build walls. He shatters them and invites us to reach beyond the boundaries that we inherit. We follow his way when we overcome our fear of the people who differ from us.

This surprising conversation gets stranger when Jesus talks about the gift of God that he describes as living water. The Samaritan woman almost seems to be joking when she points out that Jesus has no bucket for drawing out living water. She asks, "are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?" Jesus replies that the water he gives becomes a spring of water in us, water gushing up to eternal life.

The Samaritan woman asks for this water, to never thirst or to have to draw water from the well. And suddenly this place becomes even more dangerous. Jesus asks her to call her husband. She says she has none. Jesus says that she has had five that the one she has now is not her husband.

No one knows this woman's circumstances. She might have been incredibly unlucky and had five husbands who died in succession. She could have the reputation of a woman goes from man to man. Today we have the word "slut-shaming" to describe a form of manipulation and abuse by men against women. We do not know but we can imagine that this Samaritan woman could have been mistreated in this way, like the women in the Marine Corps whose naked pictures were put on the Internet.

The point is that although Jesus is not afraid to speak the truth about difficult subjects he does not judge her. He really sees her. He recognizes her for who she is and does not condemn her. Whether you are an eighth grade girl or a 49-year-old priest there is something in us that longs to be really seen by another. In this moment something changes in her heart.

The Samaritan recognizes that Jesus is a kind of prophet. She wants to talk about what her people believe. Jesus says that salvation is from the Jews, but that the days of worshiping God in special places, like Jerusalem, are over. True worship will no longer be confined to a particular place. Jesus says God will seek out the true worshipers. He says, "God is spirit. Those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth." In response the woman very seriously says that she believes the Messiah will come.

In the most astonishing dangerous statement of the whole conversation Jesus says I am he, the one speaking to you is the messiah. Of course Jesus does not say this he exactly says in Greek simply "ego eimi." "I am."

Let me explain. In the pivotal moment of the Old Testament when Moses becomes the first person to see God, God tells him to order the king to free his enslaved people. Moses asks God who he should tell the pharaoh sent him. God says tell them ego eimi, "I am" sent you. This is the moment of revelation. Moses is great not for his faithfulness but because he was the one who learned the name of God. And in the most surprising revelation of all an outcast Samaritan woman with five former husbands becomes in a sense the new Moses.⁵

The Samaritan woman leaves behind her bucket. She leaves behind her old self and becomes the first apostle in the Book of John. She emphatically tells the Samaritans, who may have previously despised her to come see a man who told me everything I have done. Many Samaritans believed because of the woman's testimony and they convince Jesus to stay with them for two days. Finally they conclude that, "we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (Jn. 4).

The biblical scholar Raymond Brown suggests that the people John wrote this Gospel for, his community, believed that they were the descendants of these Samaritans.

Do you remember Abigail Cress and the students like her from the *Most Dangerous Place on Earth*? They are not so different from the Samaritan woman or the people in our

lives. We have our own adult ways of acting as if, “unprettiness is something that needs to be atoned for.” Some of us may have everything and realize that it is not enough.

What would happen if instead of meeting Mr. Ellison, Abigail had met Jesus? What if you and I met someone who was not afraid to speak the truth about our life, to really see who we are and not judge us? What if that person pointed out that there is no right place or right way to worship, that in us we all have living waters of God springing up into eternal life? Could we ourselves leave behind our bucket? Could we become a kind of Moses for the people in our life?

¹ “You might not think that anyone in this School sees you but I do. I mean sees you really...” Lindsey Lee *The Most Dangerous Place on Earth* (NY: Random House, 2017) 11.

² *Ibid.*, 50.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴ Herman Waetjen, *The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple: A Work in Two Editions* (NY: T&T Clark, 2005) 163.

⁵ At this moment the disciples arrive. Astonished to see Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman. The conversation he had with the woman was about the human thirst for the spirit of God. With the disciples Jesus talked about the hunger people of the spirit feel for doing God’s work.