

Taboos and Tolerance

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr
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I want to start today's sermon in modern day Saudi Arabia where there is a religious police force of several thousand men. They are known as the Mutaween or in English, the Commission for Promotion of Virtue & Prevention of Vice. Their job is to enforce dress codes, gender segregation and the observance of prayers. A few years ago, the Mutaween arrested a 37 year old American businesswoman and married mother of 3 for... sitting with a male colleague at a Starbucks in Riyadh. The woman was a managing partner at the Riyadh offices of her finance company. One afternoon, when the electricity went out, she and her colleagues - who were all men - went to Starbucks to use their wireless internet service. Now in Saudi Arabia, there are family areas in public which are curtained, and there and only there are men and women allowed to interact. This group was sitting in this area, but the men & women in this group were not related. In her words "some men came up to us with very long beards and white dresses. They asked 'Why are you here together?'" She explained about the power being out in their office, but the men got very angry and told her that she was committing a great sin. The religious police then took her mobile phone, pushed her into a cab and took her to a prison where she was interrogated, strip-searched. Afterwards she was forced to sign and fingerprint a series of confessions pleading guilty to her "crime." Again, in her own words, "They took me into a filthy bathroom, full of water and dirt. They made me take off my clothes and squat and they threw my clothes in this slush and made me put them back on." Eventually she was taken before a judge who told her she was sinful and that she was going to burn in Hell. Fortunately, because of her husband's connections, she was soon released from prison.

Now that you've heard this woman's story, you're in a better position to really hear today's gospel lesson. In short, Jesus shatters any number of taboos in today's story. To start with, any self-respecting man, much less a messiah, would have never talked to this woman by the well. First of all, she was a she. And in the ancient near east, and apparently in parts of the modern near east, no more need be said. Jesus was talking to an unrelated woman: he was at strike 3 and the first pitch hadn't even been thrown. But then, to make matters worse, Jesus was talking to a Samaritan, who were considered by Jews to be pagans & half-breeds. But Jesus isn't through yet; not only does he actually talk to her, but he asks her for a drink.

Imagine the year being 1952 in rural Georgia. It's August and hot. A white Gentleman from Atlanta is walking near the colored section of Macon, GA. Why, no one is sure. But he sees a negro woman in a garden drinking from a ladel out of a bucket. He asks her for a drink. The first thing she does is to start looking for the lynch mob. So this woman is in a bit of a pickle. Should she answer or shouldn't she? She loses either way so the prudent thing would have been to turn around and run away. But for whatever reason, this spunky woman snaps back and she engages Jesus. Jesus without hesitation engages her in return. After talking for a while, Jesus asks her to go get her husband. Now again, from her perspective, this has got to smell like a set-up; but for whatever reason she tells him the truth: No, she isn't married.

It's interesting how many assumptions are made about this nameless woman, especially regarding her sexual behavior. It is frequently said that because she was at the watering hold at midday, and not in the cool of the morning with the other women, that she was a prostitute or a sexually promiscuous woman hoping to avoid other women. The text, however, offers no hints of that. Folks, when you read Scripture only through the eyes of literalism, you miss half of what's going on. If John is a reporter, then she came in the middle of the day, which may or may not tell you anything. But if John isn't a reporter but a theological artist, then all kinds of things are going on. Specifically what's going on is John is contrasting this nameless woman with Nicodemus. Last week in chapter 3 Nicodemus came in "darkest night." This week in chapter 4 she comes at high noon in lightest light. It's about theology folks, not about her behavior. Okay, yes, she does say she has had 5 husbands, but what does that mean? Maybe she had been divorced 5 times because she was barren; men could do that you know. Maybe she was a widow with bad luck. After all, back then I would have been over the hill at 45. And if her husband had died, it would've been the duty of a brother or relative to marry her. Unmarried women didn't survive long in that world.

As for the current man she was living with, St. Efreem believed she had gone through the outward motions of marriage, but that it was only a sham meant to protect her from scorn and scandal. The bottom line is that we don't know a thing about her and our fascination with her sexuality says more about us than her.

Jesus, on the other hand, had no such assumptions. And while we, even today, speculate about her behavior Jesus talks to her longer than anyone else in Scripture. And in addition, there at high noon in the lightest light, for the first time in the Gospel of John Jesus tells someone that he is the messiah. He doesn't tell John the Baptizer or Peter or any Jewish man. Rather, in an alien land with a member of the other gender who was also a member of a different race and religion, Jesus reveals himself as he did with no other. Last week Who's Who Nicodemus stumbles away clueless in the dark. This week, a woman on the periphery of Jewish society rushes to tell others of the wonders of the messiah.

Folks, please take note: when does the woman leave her conversation? She leaves when the disciples get back. They see Jesus talking to this woman and they all drop their grocery bags. She had seen this before - the looks, the comments that are never directed at her but always loud enough so she hears anyway. So she exits, quickly, stage left. Undoubtedly the disciples are incredulous that Jesus is harming his ministry by talking to the likes of that woman. Little do they understand that He didn't come to earth to be governed by Miss Manners or the Mutaween or the local church's busybody. Jesus learned that his ministry was not to be limited by the xenophobia and misogyny of others. Rather, He came to give water to anyone who was thirsty.

The Samaritan woman had every reason to expect Jesus would shame her. But instead of shunning her he stepped closer; instead of shaming her, he blessed her. He asked her for water, but in so doing he quenched her thirst. She was more than a demographic; more than a nameless woman. There's even one tradition St. Efreem remembers that believes Jesus discovered her name - Photini.

You know what is so sad and tragic? This stuff still preaches today. In the last decade, an Episcopalian church in Virginia wouldn't baptize one of the children in their congregation. And no, it had nothing to do with her unmarried mother. Rather it was about her African-American father. My friends Gary and Anna Mae are here today from upstate NY. Where we use to live, the locals lived up here. The come-here's, especially the enlisted military individuals at Ft. Drum lived down here in the sandy flats. This stuff happens all the time above & below the Mason-Dixon line. Liberals see theological neanderthals, conservatives see heathen and heretics. Gay and lesbians are treated as the scourge of the earth. Even today it's hard to see past gender, race & theological differences. Even today it's hard to do what Jesus did.

That's one of the things I like about the United Church of Christ. When the UCC says, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here," that's when we're getting to the heart of today's scripture.

But having said that, let me confess one of my biases. As I have already alluded to in another sermon, I have a overall negative opinion of contemporary Christian music. But not too long ago I came across the song found in your bulletin. The lyrics just blew me away. So I did some research on Kees. I found out that he serves an Assembly of God congregation near Seattle, WA. Folks, if you had come up to me and said, Jim I want you to hear a song by a Assembly of God minister, I would have found some polite way of ignoring you. You may not have known, but I would've blown you off. I guess you don't have to be a member of the Mutaween to judge other people. We all make assumptions about others; we all tend to think we're better than others. And we all forget that God is the God of all. And... We all forget that Jesus came to shatter a good chunk of our taboos. Why? So that we might be, not the same, but that we might all be one.

You want to grow a church? Start by tearing down some walls; start by shattering some taboos. There are so many people who are hurting because of some taboo or another. Someone who wasn't welcomed because their kid wore a hat to church... their hair was too long... their children are gay... they are divorced... etc., etc. When and if people can find a place where they are loved precisely for who they are, a lot of healing can happen.

Kees song touches on some of these taboos and in fact I'm pretty sure there are a few words in this song you won't hear in any other congregation this morning. But I think Kees does a great job of speaking of this God who dared to ask a Samaritan woman for a drink of water;

this God who willingly and purposefully shatters taboos that we all might taste of living water.
So to close today, I invite you to hear to this song with an open heart.

God of the Moon and Stars, by Kees Kraayenoord

each line ends with the phrase "I come to you."

*God of the moon & stars, God of the gays & singles bars, God of the fragile hearts we are...
God of our history, God of the future that will be, what will you make of me,...
God of the meek & mild, God of the reckless & the wild, God of the unreconciled,...
God of our life & death, God of our secrets confessed, God of our every breath,...
God of the rich & poor, God of the princess & the whore, God of the ever open door,...
God of the unborn child, God of the pure & undefiled, God of the pimp & pedophile,...
God of the war & peace, God of the junkie & the priest, God of the greatest & the least,...
God of the refugee, God of the prisoner and the free, God of our doubt & certainty,...
God of our joy & grief, God of the lawyer & the thief, God of our faith & unbelief,...
God of the wounds we bear, God of the deepest dreams we share, God of our unspoken prayer...
God of a world that's lost, God of the lonely cross, God who has come to us, I come to you.*