



3 Lent

3 March, 2002

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

The Third Sunday in Lent

3 March 2002

Throughout the church, it's the hot-button issue of the day – threatening to tear the fabric of nearly every faith community apart. If we cave in to them, if we let them become fully equal with us in every way, if we don't put some parameters on what they can and can't do in the church, the church is going to split. And we can't afford that. There are more pressing issues. Why should we single out one group for welcome? We don't want to be known as *that kind* of church. Can't *they* just be patient while we study all of this?

We all know just who *they* are: the Samaritans (who did you think I was going to say?), and *they* are at it again. Or so said the early believers – Judean Christians who had an ancient antipathy, an ancient fear, an ancient distrust of those who would not live or worship as the traditional religious folk aligned with Jerusalem did. The Samaritans were the Other of the day – the *them* – the not *us* of the early days of the Church. And they were singled out for inclusion by no less than Christ Jesus. Remember the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan? It was this total *Otherness* that gave the story of the good Samaritan its power. Those who fancied themselves religious – those who saw themselves as upholding traditional values, traditional morality could not imagine that a Samaritan could do or be anything acceptable, let alone anything good. It is a story that affirms, to the chagrin of the religious establishment that God's gifts are found even, or perhaps especially, in "them."

And then we have this morning's story. In it Jesus transgresses multiple cultural and religious boundaries. He speaks with a woman, engaging her in debate – in debate about faith. This simply isn't done, women have no place in discussions about the things of God – it's grounds not only for scandal, but for ostracism from the circles of decent folk. That the woman is a *Samaritan* – that Jesus is even in Samaritan territory – this only adds to the scandal. And the *sort* of woman she is . . . religious law, the Bible, calls for people like her to be stoned to death. But Jesus not only speaks to her, not only speaks to her of things divine, but he offers her living water – a symbol for rebirth — for the entrance of the Spirit and *all* the Spirit's gifts – not just some of the Spirit's gifts.. And this, all of it, Jesus offers without judgement, without a study task force, without a social statement. Jesus does not say, I cannot give you, an outsider, living water right away – it will upset people if I do – be patient – in due time – perhaps until then a few drops?

The problem in this morning's Gospel, perhaps the problem in everything that is Holy Gospel, Holy Good News is not in the Samaritan woman or man. The problem is not in those who are outsiders, not in those who are strange, alien, Other. The problem is within the Insiders, the problem is within those who would bind God to conventional religion, who would put God in a box. In last week's Gospel from the preceding chapter of St. John, Jesus told Nicodemus that God's spirit, the creating wind of God that hovered over the waters and brought forth the good creation, blows where it wills – you can not make it stand still like

something seen – and where it makes its way – you cannot tame it – you cannot put it under the control of your religious rules. And so too Jesus says to the Samaritan woman – the worship of God and the presence of God will not be limited to this holy place or that holy place – to this human structure or that human structure. God is spirit – ruach – breath, wind in Hebrew, pneuma – breath, wind in Greek. Rushing Spirit, rushing wind, powerful, creating, unbounded, uncontainable.

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, from which our second reading for today comes – is writing to the believers in Rome – some of the believers were Jewish – some Gentile – and the antipathy – the extreme dislike, that they each had for the other – well, it was something that St. Paul saw as contrary to the Gospel. Each was putting God in a box – the Jews thought the Gentiles were perverted abominations and going to hell – and the Gentiles thought the Jewish believers were arrogant and going to hell. St. Paul had to step in and say, wait a minute – God’s undying love for you in Christ is for all people but it is totally unearned and unearnable and the only thing you or anyone can do is trust that *it is so*. In Christ, God embraces the ungodly – that is, all people. In Christ, God crosses the chasm between God and a flawed humanity – and God’s reconciliation to and for all knows no boundaries or boxes or rules. In Christ, fitness to stand in the presence of God is no longer at issue. In Christ God has come to be in the presence of all people. In Christ God wills to enter every life – and by Christ’s death and resurrection God has spoken the ultimate word for all people, that beyond all boundaries, even beyond the boundaries of suffering and death. The last word will be God’s and God’s only – and the last Word is love, unconditional, unbounded, unfathomable love – as wild as the wind – as untamable as water pushed by the wind – God’s love for Pharisees and Samaritans alike, for all, no conditions,

This love is ours, this love is yours – it is given, a completely free gift, for each and every one of you. It is yours by faith – merely for trusting that it is so. But sometimes trust comes hard – for we are afraid of unconditional gifts – even, or maybe especially, the unconditional gift of love. Have no fear. God even takes care of that. Here in this Holy Supper, God in Christ now enters your presence, overcomes all boundaries, enters into your body, becomes you, that you shall have faith, that you shall have trust – trust that God is reconciled to you and will never, ever, ever let you go.