Room at the Table

Isaiah 55:1-2 Kimby Young

John 4:5-30 September 3, 2017

In this story from John, Jesus breaks down all kinds of barriers and reminds us that God’s invitation to love and mercy is open for everyone. First, Jesus speaks to a Samaritan which was just unheard of for a good Jewish man of the day. Even the disciples were shocked later in the story. The rivalry between the Jews and the Samaritans was a lot more than just the Kansas Missouri border wars. This was a 500 year old cultural prejudice. Jews historically felt as though Samaritans were “half breeds” or “sell outs” who intermarried with people of different faiths and abandoned the one true God – Yahweh – in order to accommodate worldly living. Correspondingly Samaritans thought Jews were snobs and perfectionists. But Jesus broke through this centuries old prejudice and struck up a conversation with a Samaritan. Not only a Samaritan but a woman. A man, a good Jew, a teacher, a leader, an unmarried, unchaperoned man – would never speak publicly to a woman. But Jesus did. And the fact that Jesus did break down those barriers, and that the woman knew he was breaking the rules, explains some of the banter back and forth between them. She wanted to make sure he wasn’t trying to trick her, or abuse her, or misuse her. But instead, Jesus saw her and spoke to her and understood her and accepted her – as she was. This was monumental for this woman.

Because as we go further into the story, we realize that few people really accepted this woman. Few people knew her or even really saw her. But Jesus did. Much in this story suggests that she had a questionable reputation, and that she was a bit of an outcast, even in her own hometown. Jesus mentions five husbands and another man who was not her husband. We don’t know whether she lost those husbands to death or divorce or something else, but by any standard, this was unusual. By any standard this woman was unconventional. The fact that she was out getting water in the heat of the day suggests that she was either avoiding people or ostracized by the other women. Most women went to the well early in the morning or late in the evening when it was cool and pleasant, and they could visit with their friends, and be safe in company. This woman avoided the public gathering times. She didn’t want to be seen or stared at by others. She went when she was sure to be alone.

But this day – she was not alone – Jesus was there. At first she ignored him and tried to go about her business. But Jesus wouldn’t leave her alone. Jesus opens conversation and invites her to join him. Jesus offers her “living water” and says “Come, drink deeply of this well of living water. Come, drink, and never be thirsty again.”

How did he know she was thirsty – spiritually thirsty? How did he know her life was dry and her well was empty? How did he know she needed to be nourished and refreshed and renewed?

Jesus knew. She was thirsty. She was lonely. She was empty. She was burdened. Oh sure, she kept up a good façade. She joked and laughed, and pretended she didn’t care what the neighbors thought. She smiled at Jesus, and even flirted a little. But Jesus knew.

Jesus saw that she needed more. Jesus saw that she was in pain. Jesus saw her shame and her suffering and her emptiness and her thirst. And Jesus said “Come.” “Come - Drink of the Living Water.” Come, be refreshed by the waters of life. Come and know me and know my Father God, and be welcome, and know that you are loved, that you are worthy, that you belong. Come. Come live in the presence of God, walk in newness of life, and be blessed. Know God’s presence through Jesus Christ. Know that you are loved. Receive all that you need. Drink deeply. Be refreshed. Receive all that you need. Come.

It doesn’t matter who you are. It doesn’t matter what you have done. Come. Be who you are called to be. Come.

How does this happen? How can the mere presence of Jesus Christ change someone’s life so completely? I don’t know, but it can. This woman’s life was never the same after her encounter with Jesus. This woman was made completely new. The presence of Jesus changes lives.

In fact, that’s what communion is all about. The very real life-changing presence of God. It’s not magical. It’s not a chemical or physical change. It is beyond mere symbolism. Communion is more than a reminder of Jesus. The sacrament of holy communion is the very presence of God with us in Jesus Christ, in this very room, at this very table. It’s impossible to explain. But just like Jesus’ invitation to that woman in Samaria 2000 years ago, each time we share communion, we experience that invitation again. Each time, Jesus says, “Come. Come be with me. Come know my Father God. Come be made one with God. Come drink deeply of the living water. Come be refreshed. Come be made new. Each time. Come to the table of grace, and receive the gifts which only Christ can offer. Come. Come everyone. Come.

And in that encounter, in that relationship, we are made new, all things are possible. Just as the woman at the well was changed by her encounter with Jesus, so are we. When she went back to her village, she was not the same. She was no longer afraid, no longer burdened, no longer guilty, no longer alone. She found herself free to be herself. She ran to find others, to tell others about what had happened to her, to let others into her life and into this miracle of grace, and to invite others to hear this glorious news, to tell them about this Jesus of Nazareth who touched her life and changed her life forever. This is the miracle of grace, and the miracle to which we are invited today. In the miracle of communion, we are united with God, connected to others, freed to be ourselves – freed to set aside old burdens, old prejudices, old pains and sufferings, freed to dance as God intends. Come, taste the water of life. Come receive the cup of hope.

And this invitation is for everyone – even those I might not welcome, or you might not invite. Jesus says, “Come. There is room enough for all of us – even a Samaritan woman of questionable morality.” Even me. Even you. Come. There is room enough for all of us. Please come, Jesus calls us. Please come to this table of grace. And like the Samaritan woman who ran back to town to tell others about Jesus, all of us must run and tell. We must share this gift so great. Who can you invite? Whom can you welcome to this table? The woman went back to the village – to those who rejected her, who hurt who, who were different and thought of her as different. She ran back and told them. Who would you never invite to your dinner table? That’s exactly who you must invite.

This table of grace is open for you. This living water. This cup of hope. Now this cup may come in many shapes and sizes. It may be shiny silver, polished and spotless. It may look great – symbol of wealth and power. But it is power poured out for the good of others. Or this cup may be more simple – more humble, a cup for ordinary people in ordinary time. We all come to Christ - we all are invited – to come as we are.

To come to this table as one family of God. To come wherever we find ourselves in life. To sit together around our dinner table. To share a common cup and to break a common loaf. Please come. Whoever you are. And invite others – whoever they are. Come. There is room enough for all of us. Come.

We come as we are. Some may seem a little odd at first glance – a little too flashy, a little too different. Different choices. Different lifestyles. And yet they too have a purpose. They too have a place. They are called by God. Come. Some may seem like enemies, but not at this table of grace. We are one.

We come as we are with all our faults and our failures, all our abilities and our dreams.

Once we get here – we might change a little bit – or a lot. In the presence of God, by the power of God, we might be able to change what needs to be changed in our selves. We might discover who we are truly meant to be – and begin living so. Hopefully, we will improve – Become more accepting of others at the table. Become more aware of others beyond the table. Become more loving of others, more open to others. Become more like our host at this banquet – more like Jesus Christ. Hopefully we will always make room for the next person at the table – even the Samaritan, even the outcast. Notice there is room at the table. There is always more room. And just like any great family dinner – we can add seats, or extensions, or card tables, or wings. There is always more room at Christ’s table. So come, and make room for others. Come. The table is ready. The feast is prepared. All are invited. Come. People of God. Come.