

**“Getting Real with Jesus”****John 4:1-42****Andrew Foster Connors****3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent****March 19, 2017**

“He had to go through Samaria.” Actually he didn’t. True, it was the most direct route, but not the route that a lot of Jews took. Saying he had to go through Samaria is like saying that someone traveling from Washington, DC to Philadelphia had to go through Baltimore. Usually, they just take the beltway. It’s like saying someone traveling from here to Catonsville has to drive through West Baltimore. Nope. Often they take I-95 south and get on the beltway to avoid driving through one of “those neighborhoods.” Or maybe a better comparison would be if Jesus were a black man riding the bus in Baltimore who had to transfer from a bus on Charles Street to a bus on York Road and he had to walk through one of the white neighborhoods to get there. Cold Spring or Northern Parkway would be the safer route.

But Jesus doesn’t take the safer route. I admire that about Jesus but it scares me even more, since it means Jesus can show up in your neighborhood anytime. You could be at work, or out taking a walk or chatting with a friend and there comes God-in-the-flesh looking as ordinary as any other human being ready to disrupt your life. “The spirit blows where it wills,” Jesus told Nicodemus last week which is a real problem for people like me trying to choose when I get to have God in my life or not. I get to decide. Jesus showing up, unannounced, scares me. I don’t even like hearing testimony from people about that kind of God.

At this NEXT Conference this week in Kansas City, one of the testimonies was from a wealthy lady – she used to be wealthy. She and her husband were filthy rich. “Whatever I wanted was mine,” she said. But soon the stuff they were consuming began to consume them. She was drunk or high or both one night just sitting in her room, alone, and she heard a voice tell her “Tamara, this isn’t what I created you for.” So she left it all. Today, she runs a chapel out of the back of an RV with poor folks who have moved into trailer parks because of financial collapse, or substance abuse or both.<sup>1</sup> Either she’s crazy, I thought to myself, or this is what the Bible means when it talks about the fear of the LORD, this frightening God coming to people like that when they’re just sitting in their rooms. He didn’t have to go through Samaria.

But he did and he met the Samaritan woman just minding her business out filling up her water jug. She wasn’t anywhere near any temples. Hadn’t gone out for a religious experience. She was just there doing the ordinary and Jesus comes to her.

Now we have to be honest in church that we’ve raised Jesus up to be a feminist hero in this story largely by telling stories about historical Judaism that are

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<sup>1</sup> You can watch her testimony at <http://nextchurch.net/gatherings/watch-now/>, Wednesday Plenary video beginning at minute 12:40.

exaggerated. “Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans,” the text says. Well, not exactly. Samaritans and Jews shared the same ancestors. Samaritans had intermarried with Assyrians in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Their religion and their culture had diverged. They had a history. But to say that Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans would be like someone saying years from now that African-Americans and Caucasians in Baltimore did not share things in common with each other. It would be more accurate to say, there’s a history there that makes relationships, on the whole, challenging and trust harder to achieve. There’s a history there that creates divisions that are hard to overcome. There’s a history there that contextualizes current relationships. Same with the comment about his disciples being shocked to find him speaking with a woman as if Jewish men didn’t speak with women. Sure, there are sexist views by rabbis in rabbinical texts, just as there are really sexist views by the so-called church fathers in early Christian texts. But if the disciples are shocked to see Jesus speaking with a woman it’s probably because he’s a man in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, not because he’s a Jewish man. It’s probably because that man is speaking to someone from a culture and a people with a complex relationship to his own. We don’t need to raise up Jesus by pushing down Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

Truthfully, it’s Jesus who makes me cringe at some of the comments he makes to this woman. “Go and call your husband.” “I have no husband.” “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; <sup>18</sup> for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” He names what is true but she is awfully vulnerable. And church interpreters through the ages have jumped all over her vulnerability, shaming her as a loose woman, an adulteress, and worse. Even though we know nothing of the details of her situation nor of the men in this patriarchal context who are likely more responsible for her marital status.

This is the way some churches have rewarded vulnerability, by punishing people for it. A child of the church comes out gay and the church exiles him as sinner. A woman senses a call from God in a church that doesn’t allow it, and she is made the problem, not the church’s teaching itself. A family doesn’t fit traditional arrangements and they are passed over for leadership or relationship or both. This is the way some churches have rewarded vulnerability, by punishing their own for it.

Then there our churches more like ours where vulnerability is hidden. So I’ve heard it said in our congregation, “Well, nobody in our church voted for Trump” when I know that’s not true. And I’ve heard the comment, “Well most people at Brown have plenty of financial resources” and I know plenty of us who are paycheck to paycheck, hidden. “Sometimes I just can’t bring myself to come to church,” someone told me, “because everyone there seems so much more successful than I am, so accomplished – not like me.” Hidden. And I know the way he felt because sometimes I feel the same way.

In seminary, my preaching classmates called me “the brooder.” I have a special gift for taking anything light and airy and playful and making it deep and

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<sup>2</sup> For a compelling Jewish voice on these matters, see Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, (New York: HaperCollins), 2006.

intense. It works well in sermons and prophetic actions, but not so well at dinner parties or social gatherings, or evenings with family. October of 2015 I hit a wall and went into depression. It was so bad I went to my physician. For several weeks I did what I can do quite well – fake it.

But then I started noticing the sermons I was preaching – “beyond the veil” – “hope in exile,” “letting it all go,” were incomplete. I was willing to risk telling the truth about God’s involvement in the life of the world from the pulpit, but not in my own. It’s like Jesus was showing up, not a voice or anything like that telling me to buy an RV and start a chapel (thankfully), but in people and scripture and prayer in all sorts of ways like he shows up today to the woman, inviting me to step into a vulnerable space. I stepped into that space tentatively, sharing the truth of my inner life with more than just my wife. It was a small step, but still a step toward the God who wants to know us and love us as we are.

“Go and call your husband,” Jesus says to the woman, a comment to demands a response. And the Samaritan woman has to decide how she’s going to answer. She could have walked away just as we often do when God gets close to our own wounds. “Go and call your husband.” “Good day, sir.” But instead she steps into the space. She takes a risk – a personal one – that opens herself to another.<sup>3</sup>

Too often, I think, we make the decision not to step into that space. Maybe it’s because we just elected a President who was rewarded for attacking people in their vulnerability. Maybe it’s because his budget is a frontal assault on the most vulnerable citizens among us. And our instinct is rightly to protect, to preserve, to defend. And so, we think, the lesson is that vulnerability makes you weak.

But here’s what I’ve learned as a pastor who is often present to people in times of their greatest vulnerability. A lesson that one of our preachers repeated at the NEXT Church national gathering this week: when we build walls to keep people out, we’re left in here alone. And Jesus isn’t looking for people skilled at pretending that they are something other than themselves. He’s looking for you, he’s looking for me. He doesn’t have to go through Samaria. He came here for you.

“the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.” *The Message* translation puts it this way: it’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before God in their worship.”

Franklin Witcher was arrested for a murder at age 16 and sentenced to life in prison. He was probably tried in about a day on the basis of testimony from two older boys who got off. He spent 44 years in prison before a kind attorney took a look at his file and thought, this is not right. At the hearing for his release, the children of the victim came to say, “we agree this man should be released. He was only 16. He’s been in prison for 44 years.” The state released him with nothing – in winter – no jacket – not a dime to his name. He had no family. So this Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> I thank the Rev. Marcie Auld Glass for her sermon on this text which particularly influenced the direction of this sermon. Her sermon from the NEXT Church 2017 National Gathering can be found here, <http://nextchurch.net/gatherings/watch-now/>, Tuesday Evening Worship.

attorney waited for six hours for his Muslim client because he knew that no one should be released onto the street like that. He connected Franklin to a social services program and his social worker was so taken by him that she had him over for Thanksgiving dinner with her family because she knew in her heart that no one should be alone like that. A Presbyterian minister from Philly alerted me to the situation. He had been writing to Franklin for about 20 years and cared about him. And he asked me if anyone at Brown Memorial would be willing to befriend him because he had no family and this pastor knew that any church worth its salt is about a different kind of family. Roger and Sandra Fink stepped up and helped him get basic furniture like a mattress to sleep on, taught him how to shop for groceries, and what to look for in a love partner because, you know, he went in at age 16. And then a year and 3 months after being released into freedom, Franklin died. Heart failure. So tragic, except that this Muslim black man crucified by a whole system so much larger than any of us, brought out the best in a Jewish attorney and a Baltimore Christian social worker, and in Roger and Sandra and some others of you who stepped into vulnerability and found something miraculous and connecting and fragile there.

Franklin's childhood friend said it like this: "each of you showed him what love is. You loved him." That's true, but as I looked around at this wild community of people gathered together at church last week, I realized Franklin had drawn that love out of each of us. We had just been willing to step into that space. Space created by the one who goes through Samaria, not because he has to but because he's looking for you and me there.

So the question for today is simply this: what is one space of vulnerability in your life that God is calling you to step into? It could be in your family, or your workplace, or here in this church. What is one space of vulnerability that you are willing to step into at this time in your precious life?