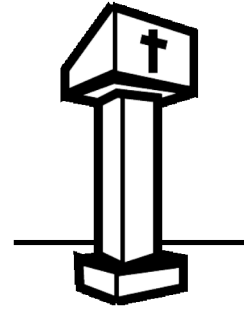


Sermon Synopsis

“Encountering Judgment”

by the Rev. Peter Champion
The Third Sunday in Lent



What do we know about the woman Jesus met at the well in this morning's Gospel? We know that she's a woman. The social customs of Jesus' time would have strongly discouraged Jesus from speaking with a woman unless in situations like this. We know that she's a Samaritan. Jews saw the Samaritans as heretics and half-breeds, and to share food or drink with them would render a Jew ritually impure. Many people will tell you that she's a woman of "ill repute." She's had 5 husbands, and is now living with a man outside the bonds of marriage. One well-known living American evangelical preacher went so far as to call her a whore.

But the Lutheran seminary professor David Lose argues that there are several other plausible explanations for her marital history. In the time before antibiotics, a simple scratch or an ear infection could lead to death—perhaps she'd lost a string of husbands. (In colonial America, by the way, the average marriage lasted only 7 years before the death of husband or wife.) Or perhaps she'd been divorced or abandoned. Remember, a man could divorce his wife simply by writing a statement that said "I divorce you." Finally, the Jews had a social custom we call Levirate marriage. If a man died childless, his brother was expected to marry the widow and father an heir for him. In some cases, such conjugal unions weren't considered marriage.

Lose's point is that, while the common interpretation is that this nameless woman was a shrew or a philanderer, there is no real evidence to support that interpretation. Rather, he asserts, the common view of the woman is the result of misogyny. I'll use a different word to explain it—prejudice. Prejudice is, as it sounds, a pre-judgment on the basis of insufficient evidence.

Pre-judging is something we've all done, and also something we've all experienced. I live in Rodeo, a funky lower and lower-middle class blue collar community. There is a public housing project _ a mile from my house, and an oil refinery just a bit farther. When I've told people where we live, I've had people roll their eyes. I can see from their faces and tell from the tone in their voices that their opinion of me changes when they learn where I live. But, I've heard folks in Rodeo talk about people who live in Lamorinda in the same prejudicial way.

They're snobs; they're all rich and greedy; they all think they're better than we are.

One of the truly dangerous things prejudice can do is to get inside the heads of people who are judged by others. When you experience judgment often enough, you begin to believe it. I remember the transition from elementary school to junior high... People who'd been friends in 6th grade suddenly didn't know me in 7th. Why? I never knew. But experiencing that repeated rejection made me begin to wonder if maybe I really was a loser.

The marvelous thing in today's Gospel is that Jesus cuts through the prejudices against women and Samaritans. He treats the woman with respect; he answers her questions. He treats her as a person worthy of dignity and respect. And in that encounter, she is changed. This truly was a saving encounter for the woman.

What are we to take from this story that we can apply to our lives today? I'd like to suggest that there are 3 key points for us to keep in our minds and hearts.

First, Jesus invites us to set aside the prejudices of our time and place, just as he did in his interactions with the woman. Now there is nothing wrong with judging. Judgment is an act of reason, and reason is a gift from God. Jesus himself says, "Who begins to build a tower without 1st judging whether he or she has enough money to finish the job?" But pre-judgment is another matter. It isn't an act of reason, but is based on insufficient evidence. As we look at people and situations, it is important that we set aside prejudgments.

Second, Jesus invites us to see that prejudice against us does not mean that we are bad or evil or worthless. Jesus invites us to recognize that we are beloved children of God, worthy of respect and dignified treatment. Jesus treats the woman this way. Jesus wants us to be treated this way. And Jesus wants us to treat others this way.

Finally, I want you to consider the woman's response to Jesus' treatment. The Gospel tells us that she was so excited by her encounter with Jesus that she left her water jar sitting by the well and went to tell others about him. When was the last time we were that excited by what God was doing in our lives? That we were willing to drop what we were doing and go share about it with others?

In the Gospel, this woman is nameless. But the eastern churches have given her a name. She is St. Photini. Her name comes from the Greek word for light, and she is called "Equal of the Apostles." May we, like her, be bearers of light and equals of the apostles.