

We are by ourselves, but not alone

Preaching in the Age of COVID

John 4:5-42

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Come Holy Spirit and enkindle with us the fire of your burning love, in your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

Good Morning!

My name is Bonnie Perry and I'm the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan. I'm here, in our Cathedral, by myself, but I am not alone. In this time of increasing fear, I know that I and that you, that we are not alone.

Picture if you will a woman: A stunning woman of a reasonable age, by herself, at mid-day moving purposefully toward the village well. She has her jar, balanced on her head. It sways in time with her body as she walks.

None of the other women, from the village are at the well at noon. Instead, they all go to get water, to see one another at the crack of day, when the air is cool and the sun is low. They get water and gossip, stories and connections in equal portions. They check in on one another, tell tales of triumph and trial, romance and birth, death and disease, collectively as the sun sits on the horizon, they are a web of understanding, and a community of connection.

Our woman, the one we see walking toward the well in the middle of the day is not part of that connected community. There is social distancing friends and there is social distancing. She is walled off from the community, getting water at the hottest time of the day for though it may be hot, it free from shame. In the early morning light, if she goes to the well all who are there, do not see her lively face or steady eyes, they only see what they hear, that she has had five, not four, not three, but five husbands and that's not counting the man with whom she is currently shackled up.

Her reputation precedes her and so her peers keep their distance, she is left alone: only talked about, never to...socially it is not wise to be seen with her. So—she is by herself.

But on this day when she approaches the well, by herself, she is not alone.

Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew is there. And he asks her, a Samaritan woman, for water from the well. This is not done, distance is always kept between Jews and Samaritans, men and women. Yet he, Jesus, speaks to her, sees her, asks her for water. When she questions him, points out that he may have crossed a distance, plowed past a societal boundary, or two, he does not care.

To the woman who is by herself, all alone, he says,
“If you knew of the gift of God and who it is who is asking you for a drink of water, you would have asked and he would have given you living water.”

“You have no bucket, the well is deep. Are you really, she said, all that impressive?”

Looking at her still he says,

*“Everyone who drinks this water, will be thirsty again.
 But the ones who drink of the water I give them,
 will never thirst again—it will be a spring of water
 gushing up to eternal life.”*

Then, because he was on a roll—he says to her,

“Go and get your husband.”

“Sir, I have no husband...”

He looks at her, directly at her, without condemnation or judgement—and quietly offers her the truth of her life.

“No—you’re right—you don’t have a husband—you’ve had five husbands and the man you are with now—is not your husband.”

“ so—oh—I see that you are a prophet sir.”

I know that the messiah is coming, and when he comes he will tell us all things.”

Jesus says, so clearly, and succinctly across all the boundaries of the world to the woman who had been so very alone,

“I am he—the one who is speaking to you.”

She—leaves her jar—runs to her village—to the very people who will never come near her---she tells the ones who have banished her from their lives, she tells them all, *“I have met a man that has told me all that I have ever done, and loved me still, loved me all—is it—Could it be that he is the Messiah?”*

And because of her tone, because of what she said, or maybe because as she spoke she knew she would never ever be alone again, they heard her.

They went to see—and they listened to him—and they believed.

My friends, in this time, of increasing fear, in this time when it truly is a Christian virtue to put space between us all, it is hard for us not to feel as if we are all alone in this world: unconnected, abandoned, without near enough toilet paper or hand sanitizer, yet I am here to say, that all of the social distancing in the world cannot separate us from Christ Jesus. Just as he crossed the distance of the day, to love and to care for the unnamed woman at the well, he is here for us now.

And though we may be quarantined and only venturing to the well at mid-day when no one is around, We are not alone. I am not alone for here you are listening to me, hearing me, seeing me, missing me, maybe even loving me.

And I am here, so longing to be with you. So let us not be alone. Let us ask for living water, one from another, let us call and talk, call and listen. In this time of Lent and contagion, let us pray continuously for each other, let us remind each other that we are here separate, but somehow connected, intentionally caring, going out of our way, e-mailing, texting, shopping, continuously checking—all the while keeping the distance, the social distance, but not the emotional care, the social distance that will change the course of this pandemic.

I am by myself in this grand place, but none of us, none of us are alone.

Amen.