

Disappointment

February 24, 2008

(Lent 3 - Year A)

John 4: 5-42

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Even though she is the subject of what is probably the longest Gospel reading I have ever heard in church,

The Samaritan woman at the well in John's Gospel has led a life full of disappointment.

From what we know, the Samaritan woman at the well has at least 3 strikes against her.

First of all, the woman at the well is a Samaritan.

Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans and they certainly did not use the same cup to drink from as them.

The Jews viewed the Samaritans with contempt, as some wacky cult that resembled Judaism, yet was not seen as the "true religion."

The second strike against the woman at the well is that she is a woman.

In Jesus' day, the morning devotions of Jewish men included the prayer: "Thank God that I am not a woman."

The third strike of disappointment for the woman at the well is that she has had five husbands who have divorced her.

She has been rejected so many times by men in bad marriages that she has given up on the idea of marriage and decided to just live together with her current partner.

The multi-partnered Samaritan woman at the well has certainly led a life full of disappointment.

Last Wednesday, my last remaining grandparent died at the age of 95.

So yesterday, our family traveled to Houston together so that I could bury my Grandma Fisher.

By way of background, back 15 years ago or so, my dad's branch of the

family became estranged from my uncle's branch of our family, due to years and years of entangled and complicated relationships and decisions.

Because of this rift in our family, I had not seen or spoken to my aunt or my 3 first cousins, in over 15 years.

When my Grandma Fisher died on Wednesday, I called my aunt that night to tell her the news and to invite her to the burial service.

I had not spoken to my aunt in over 15 years.

She had no idea that I had become a priest.

She asked about my children and how they had grown, since she has not seen Scott since he was a baby and she has never met John.

After my phone conversation with my aunt, I had a good feeling.

I envisioned a pastoral scene at the graveside of my grandmother, where all of us would be reunited as a family, where we would all rally around the graveside of our common grandmother and be reconciled.

When I arrived at the funeral home yesterday morning, I discovered that my aunt and my cousins had already come to the funeral home privately the night before, to pay their respects.

We knew this because they had signed the guest book.

Yet, in the afternoon, as I began to say the opening sentences of the Burial service at my grandmother's graveside, I looked up and saw that my aunt and my cousins - were missing.

Obviously, that branch of the family had decided to not come to be with us.

There was no glorious reunification.

There was no rallying around the graveside.

There was no reconciliation.

And I was disappointed.

One summer, I worked as a chaplain in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, also known as the NICU, at the Washington Hospital Center in DC.

I went from incubator to incubator, praying over tiny, tiny babies who

had been born extremely premature.

I prayed with parents that God would heal and grow these babies' little lungs.

I prayed for these tiny babies, and yet, many times, the babies did not make it, and

These parents were tragically disappointed.

I am sure that many of us come into this church this morning with our stories of disappointment,

Stories of lives like the Samaritan woman,

Stories of lives with 1, 2, 3 or maybe more strikes against them,

Stories of broken relationships, broken jobs, broken homes, broken bodies.

And we are disappointed.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman at the well, and says to her:

“Give me a drink.”

After an engaging exchange of words between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus offers the woman living water, gushing up to eternal life.

And Jesus addresses this woman's disappointments head on.

Jesus acknowledges her disappointment at being a Samaritan, because he is willing to drink out of the same cup as her.

Jesus acknowledges her disappointment in being a woman, because he is willing to talk to a strange woman at high noon.

Jesus acknowledges her disappointment in her dealings with men, because he openly names her failed relationships with 5 husbands.

After hearing about Jesus' living water of understanding and compassion,

Then, the woman drops her water jar onto the ground and runs back to the city, exclaiming:

“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!

Come and see a man who knows everything that has ever disappointed me!”

You see, the Samaritan woman did not ask Jesus to change her current situation.

The Samaritan woman did not ask Jesus to make her into an orthodox Jew.

She did not ask Jesus to make her into a man.

She did not ask Jesus to give her a loving husband.

The Samaritan woman received living water because Jesus knew and understood about her deepest disappointments and failures in life.

Jesus understands because Jesus was nailed to the Cross, in one of the most colossal disappointments of all time.

For the man who had entered Jerusalem on a donkey, hailed as the King of the Jews, was killed as an enemy of the state.

The man who had called his friend Peter “the rock on which I will build my church,” was denied 3 times by that same friend.

The man who calls all of us his friends, was betrayed by his friend, Judas.

The man who was proclaimed as the Messiah by the Samaritan woman, was executed as a death row inmate.

For Jesus knows what it is like to be undercut, betrayed, underappreciated, denied, beaten up, fired, spit upon, hung out to dry, ignored, reamed out and nailed to a piece of wood.

Jesus understands what it is like be disappointed.

And after Jesus had died, the Roman soldier stuck a spear into Jesus’ side, and out of his side flowed blood - and water.

Out of his wounded side, gushed the living water of understanding,

The living water of knowing all our disappointments and failures.

For the living water that Jesus offers to the Samaritan woman,

The living water that Jesus offers to you and to me,

Is not a magic potion that takes away the pain and suffering and heartache of our lives.

The living water that Jesus offers us is the living water of compassion - the compassion that God knows and cares and loves us in the midst of our failures.

Because Jesus did not come to take away our disappointments, but to fill up our broken lives with living water.

So, come.

Come and see a man who offers living water of compassion.

Come and see a man who knows everything that has ever disappointed you.

AMEN.

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