

She waits inside her tiny house - lonely - desolate - she keeps glancing out the window, heaving a sigh and going back to her seat. She is waiting for all of the women in the town to finish at the well...by the time they are done it will be the heat of the day and it will be her turn... this is her choice. When all is clear she will put on her scarf...take her water jar and scurry, like a rat not wanting to be noticed - down the hill and around the corner. She does not want to take the risk of running into the women who will walk by her and look through her like she doesn't exist or the men who will make crude remarks...she isn't sure which is worse. Although she isn't that old she is stooped from the burden of a weary life.

Our scripture this morning says that she has been married 5 times and is currently living with someone who is not her husband. So, that is her story....or it is the story that this village knows, and you know that living in a village if one person knows, the whole village knows (be it right or be it wrong)...the women whispering "she's been married five times you know" tsk tsk...the men..."she's been married five times you know" nudge nudge wink wink. In the reading that I was doing to

prepare this sermon I came across this bit of “marital history” that may shed some light on her situation.

Women were not permitted to divorce their husbands except on grounds of adultery, so there are at least five options of what may be happening here: (1) either she married men who committed adultery and she left, or (2) perhaps she is infertile and cannot bear children, so each husband left her to find a woman who could; or (3) perhaps her husbands, having likely been significantly older than she, passed away, leaving her widowed; (4) it is possible that she was in a levirate marriage, which obligates the husband’s brother to marry his brother’s widow to produce an heir should the husband pass away, but didn’t necessarily guarantee the status as wife. Finally, (5) she may have been taken in by a male relative as she was husbandless and needed someone to care for her.

Regardless of which scenario rings true for this woman, we know that she has experienced deep loss, sadness and vulnerability. Not only have the men in her life left her abandoned, her family, friends and neighbours have shunned her, or perhaps worse, forgotten to care of her. But we don’t know do we? That part was left out...along with her name.

But then she goes to the well and meets - a man - a Jew - she should have turned and walked away - for a woman speaking to a man - a Jew - alone - could be another strike against her - but she doesn't - she took a risk - and she enters into conversation.

And little does she know that this will be a turning point in her life as this man begins to give her gifts.....

First he gives her the gift of respect - he sees her for who she really is - not the stories that preceded her

He gives her the gift of a new life by offering her the living water - water that will not quench her thirst but will quench your soul

He gives her the gift of compassion when she realizes that although somehow he knows her story he doesn't condemn her and he treats her with dignity....

and then when she turns to walk away.....and says **only to her** "I am he....I am the Messiah"

He sees her, all of her, and he knows her. And in spite of society having deemed her unpopular, or disposable, or unclean, Jesus welcomes her into his heart and with his words allows her to feel worthy, good, and

important. And he shares with her that he is, in fact, the Messiah...he has offered her some credibility with the village..and so with lightness of step that she did not have when first coming to the well she goes and tells everyone she meets..."I have met the Messiah" "The Messiah spoke to me" she told her story and they listened. She is the same woman...she still had five husbands...she still lived with one who was not her husband...but she has met the Messiah and he has given her a story to tell....

Jesus knew her story - but no one else had bothered to ask her....

There's a wonderful quote from Muriel Rukeyser: the universe isn't made of atoms. It is made of stories. When we learn someone else's story, it shifts the fabric of our being. We are more open. And when we are open, we connect.

I love stories...I love telling them and I love listening to them....people are eager to share - if only they are asked...

As I said at the beginning of the service I have spent the last week in a folk music workshop in Haliburton. I met 10 great people...all enjoying and loving music....and all with stories to tell...

a woman who retired last year and has had “a year from hell” with two aging parents who had to be moved to assisted living and who were hoarders for 40 years. It was her job to clean out the house. She had anger and sadness

....the man whose son committed suicide four years ago and he told me that it took him two years to breath again and he is grieving

.....the woman whose daughter has been living with liver disease and the future is uncertain and she is scared

These stories give the storyteller an outlet...these stories give the listener an opportunity to make a difference..with a word...with a hug... and there were as many good stories -

....people are eager to share....

A few Sundays ago I was working in the kitchen at our church after yet another United Church meal.....I was working alongside a woman I have sung with in the choir for well over a year. I said “Sheila...I have

known you for quite awhile but I know nothing about you” well, I’m not sure how that made her feel but I can only assume she was not offended by it - she told me some of her story...she told me what she was comfortable telling me - it was great...I made a connection.

The second time was when I did a service at Empire Crossing, a new retirement home in Port Hope. I call it Fellowship Around the Table..and that is what it is - we sit around a table...have prayer...I read some scripture and I give a short message. On this day I shared a story that my Mother had written about church as a little girl. I then opened it up for them to tell their stories - their memories of church. A few people shared some wonderful stories...but one woman in particular shared a very personal, very heartbreaking story - I could feel the other women connecting with her - connecting from woman to woman...from mother to mother...no judgement...suffice it to say that the Holy Spirit was alive and well in that room on that day. We all felt it.

Who would you be in the story of the Samaritan Woman - would you be the one who stands in judgement knowing only what you have heard...

would you be one who would put a loaf of bread at her doorstep in the cover of night so as not to be seen - would you be the one to invite her in - to offer her a place of sanctuary - to offer her friendship. Who do you want to be in that story? Who do you want to be today?

We all strive to be like Jesus. Compassionate...loving...non-judgemental...it isn't always easy.

Being seen...being heard...being listened to...with no judgement...that is amazing grace....that is what Jesus gave to the woman at the well...

Poet Christy Sarschel sums it up beautifully in this poem entitled

With conditioned eyes

Making wild guess judgments

About the length of my hair,

The color of my skin

The maker of my shoes

Never knowing what is real

Or who I really am

Once, someone looked at me

Through a compassionate heart

And all that was invisible
Was revealed in the light of it
Pain, fear, love, hope
Fresh wounds and old scars
Longing and aspiration
And my own heart smiled
Under that gentle gaze
In the clarity of both seeing
And being truly seen
and for this I say "Thanks be to God"