

SermonsA17Lent3

Exodus 17:1-7

John 4:5-42

Today, before I talk about *The Woman at the Well in Samaria* I want to talk about *The Man in the Maine Woods*.

Back in the late 1980's a twenty year old man named walked off the job one day. He left his tools behind, got in his car and started driving. He had always been a bit of a loner - keeping mostly to himself in high school. People would later say that he had been quiet but polite and well mannered. Beyond his tendency to keep mostly to himself there was nothing particularly extraordinary about him ... nothing that would have predicted how he would navigate the next 30 years of his life.

He didn't take much with him the day he left work for good. Beyond the clothes on his back and what he had in his wallet he didn't have much in the way of supplies. Nevertheless, he somehow made his way slowly south – taking the backroads from his small home town in Central Maine all the way to Florida.

Once he was in Florida all he did was simply turn around and head back the way he came.

When he reached his hometown in Maine he drove straight through it. He didn't even stop at his house to visit his mother and brother. He drove into the woods and kept right on driving until the road stopped, the woods grew thick, and he simply couldn't drive any further. Leaving the keys in the car, he got out and entered the heavily-boulder-strewn-densely-wooded area.

In a short time he found a sheltered area between several massive boulders. It was covered with tree trunks and branches. The place itself resembled something between a cave, a den or a wigwam. He made it his dwelling. Despite the fact that it was a mere 3 miles from the nearest cabin, his shelter was completely hidden to the outside world. He could hear the bark of dogs,

the sounds of children playing, and the conversations of hikers. But, no one knew he was living there ... no one knew for sure anyway.

People began to have suspicions though after a time. In 1987 a series of strange robberies began to occur in the area. The thief didn't seem to be interested in money, electronics, or power tools ... the usual things that can easily be spent, sold or pawned. Meat, canned goods, and other grocery items were taken. Sleeping bags and blankets also went missing. Sometimes rope, a tarp, a knife, a flashlight or other things one might need to survive in the woods disappeared. Besides those necessities, thousands of books also vanished. The thief never broke a pane of glass or pried open a door. Instead, he picked locks open without doing any damage. Upon leaving, he always made sure that the door was locked behind him. People around campfires at night began to tell tales of the legendary North Pond Hermit. No one knew his name. For that matter no one knew if such a person really existed at all. Over 30 years though police recorded 1,000 or more minor thefts in the area.

A few people who believed in the legendary Hermit of North Pond began to leave shopping lists out for him. They offered to leave out - for easy pick-up - whatever he would put on the list. He never wrote on any of those lists. For nearly 30 years the man avoided any direct interaction with other human being. One hiker, who stumbled close to the man's hidden dwelling, elicited a surprised, "Hi." But, that trivial single syllable comprised the sum total of his uttered speech for three decades.

The self-imposed isolation ended in 2013 when the Hermit of North Pond was caught stealing food and supplies at Pine Tree Camp. After his arrest the man would make no eye contact and spoke not a single word until a woman police officer sat with him in silence for 2 hours. Eventually, they were able to identify him as a local-boy-turned-man by the name of Christopher Thomas Knight. Even when jailed, Knight revealed very little about himself or the inner workings of his mind. Eventually he did make a tenuous connection with a persistent

writer named Michael Finkel. Finkel eventually recorded Knight's story in a book titled: *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit*.

Despite the fear and notoriety that his string of over 1,000 burglaries fostered in the area, the courts recognized that the clearly identifiable criminal behaviors were deeply intertwined with mental health issues. Even the prosecution was moved by the sincerity of Knight's deep ethical remorse about the burglaries he had committed. His shame about having had to steal to survive in his self-imposed isolation appeared genuine. By the time he was sentenced he had served all but a week of his seven month jail time. The judge who sentenced him also ordered him to complete a *Co-Occurring Disorders Program* (a program for people with mental health disorders and substance abuse problems). Over time that program helped him acquire some very basic social/emotional survival skills that he lacked. Judge Nancy Mills, the one who sentenced, him met with him every week throughout his three year probation.

**Like the Samaritan Woman at the Well, Christopher Thomas Knight was seen ... truly seen ... probably for the first time in his life ... as the person he truly is ... someone who struggles in a way that is hard for many people to understand.**

In order to embrace Christopher Knight with compassion you have to contemplate the forces that led him into the woods and the struggles that he experienced in isolation for 30 years in the woods. In order to embrace the Samaritan Woman with compassion you have to contemplate the forces within and without that led to a string of failed relationships and a position of isolation within society.

Over the years I have heard and read countless sermons that point out how wonderful it is that Jesus invites this profligate-foreign-woman-with-a past to stand under the great umbrella of God's grace. Five-times divorced and from the wrong side of the border, she can *still* be assured of a place in the Kingdom of God because God forgives even the *worst* of sinners. I've also heard the story told to illustrate feminist perspectives. Even though she is *just a woman*, Jesus talks to her as an equal. At other times the

Samaritan woman has been held up as consummate outsider, someone whose presence symbolizes Jesus' desire to reach out beyond Israel. Jesus includes her even if she is *not a Jew*. Over the years, her story has become *a story told to make a point* instead of *a story about a woman with a real mind, a real heart and real feelings*.

What do you suppose it was like for this woman who came, to the well ... alone ... in the middle of the day ... when no other women would be around? What was her state of mind? What was her day to day reality?

First of all, consider the fact that we don't know whether she was divorced or if her husbands died or if she experienced a combination of the two. In the case of divorce, she could not have initiated the legal proceedings. Only men were allowed to divorce their wives, not the other way around. Anyone who has been through a divorce, including me, can tell you that this it is grueling and demoralizing. In the case of death, she would not have been allowed to inherit any of her husband's property. Anyone who has been without a source of income or a home to live in can tell you how desolate and desperate that feels. Not just once, but five times she has gone through these difficult upheavals in her life. Imagine how life had ground her down.

Most of us have heard the tale of this woman told man times over the years. My guess is that we have mostly thought about her life circumstances in terms of shame. She must have come during midday because she is ashamed of having been married five times and because she is living unmarried with a man now. **Maybe though, maybe the Samaritan Woman doesn't come to the well at that time of day because of shame. Maybe she comes because she wants solitude.** Maybe the weight of so many griefs weighs heavy on her soul and her trust in human relationships has worn thin. Maybe she just doesn't have the energy to keep up the front of social nicety anymore. Maybe, like Christopher Knight, she finds a life of isolation preferable to a life that requires a multitude of social interactions – positive or negative ... because of her mental state.

Her self-imposed isolation, like Christopher's, is broken by a force from the outside. This time it isn't the police force though. This time the force is Jesus. Something in her changes as he engages her in conversation. By the end of their conversation she is no longer avoiding people. She is, instead, running toward others to share the story of the man she met by the well. How does Jesus bring about this spectacular change?

**First**, Jesus doesn't come across as being "all together." He's not afraid to ask her to help him out with something ... something he needs that is within her capacity. "Bring me a drink," he says. In doing so he doesn't just see her for what *she* needs; he sees her for what she is capable of offering. **Second**, Jesus doesn't appear to feel disdain, disgust or pity for her because of the things she's gone through. He replays some of the important facts of her life back to her without judgement ... stating them as matters of facts ... things she's been through but not the sum defining total of who she is and will be. **Third**, he invites her to imagine a future in which things will be different ... not just for her but for everyone ... a future without division. **Fourth and finally**, he is not shaken up about social mores when his disciples return ... he doesn't hide or excuse the fact that he has kept company and been in conversation with her.

In my experience, there is more to the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well than good ways to back up our Lutheran theological perspectives. There is also, embedded in the narrative, a model for good healing practice. There is a model for how to engage and help people who struggle with feeling isolated, alienated, anxious about, or disconnected from people around them. This is a model for good healing practice when we feel that way ourselves too. We don't talk openly about these things often, especially if we are the ones leaning toward isolation. There is still a stigma. But, perhaps we should talk more. Not so long ago same there was a stigma to having breast cancer and no one talked about it. Today, we talk and look at all the progress that's been made. People thirst for community and human interaction all around us within and beyond our walls. Let's take after Jesus and offer refreshment wherever we can. AMEN