

Jesus Builds Bridges to Connect People

By: Susan Candea

March 15, 2020. Bishop Susan Candea preaches on the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, and building bridges to connect people, as we celebrate the Installation of Pastor Meagan today.

Readings: [John 4:5-42](#)

*** Transcript ***

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Whew! There is a lot going on, isn't there?! In some ways it feels so surreal, this whole coronavirus pandemic thing. Did you ever think that we would be talking about a pandemic? Things are rapidly changing, and it's hard to know what is the appropriate response. How should we be feeling? What ought we doing? Are we taking enough precautions? Are people overreacting? How are we supposed to feel? Are we supposed to cancel everything? Keep going on? What kind of adjustments? It really feels like a lot, doesn't it? And in the midst of all of this, we're in the season of Lent — a time when we gather more intentionally as a church, to engage in the disciplines of repentance and prayer and acts of charity and fasting, when we hear and respond even more deeply to the invitation to return to the Lord our God.

And on this Sunday in Lent we have this long gospel that is full of all kinds of stuff: a Samaritan woman being approached by Jesus for a drink, and the whole bit about Jews don't have anything in common with Samaritans, launching into this discussion of living water, the strange detail about the woman having five husbands (what is that all about?), the disciples coming back with food only to be told, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me," then launching into a conversation about harvest and reaping (where did that come from?) ending with the Samaritan woman bringing people to meet Jesus. Whew, there's a lot going on in this story, isn't there?

Oh, and by the way we are also installing your new pastor! After many months of discernment and transition, you are officially welcoming a new pastor, embarking on a new relationship with one another, stepping into the future of which God is calling all of you. That's a big deal. There's a lot going on: lots of excitement, lots of changes. Because we all know we're each different. She's different. You're different. Things are going to be different. So you get to explore and experience and grow in this new relationship. Have I mentioned that there's a lot going on?

So in the midst of all of this, what is the gospel? What is the good news that we are invited to hear this day? Well first of all, the good news always begins with Jesus, so let's start with him. And what we see in our gospel is that Jesus is the one who reaches out to the Samaritan woman, even though Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans. What we see in our gospel is Jesus offering living water, Jesus having a theological conversation with the woman — in other words, talking about God with her. And then, that is what brings more people to seek out Jesus and to hear and experience him as the Savior of the world. In other words, Jesus builds bridges that connect people — connect people with God and connect people with one another. And that is the theme of my sermon this morning: Jesus builds bridges to connect people. Jesus builds bridges to connect people.

Let's start by talking about why building bridges is even necessary. Well, that's pretty easy, isn't it? We all know why: because we are a divided people, with what sometimes seems like huge chasms between us. In Jesus' day it was the Jews and Samaritans who had nothing to do with each other because they did not share things in common. In our day there is a long list of groups of people who have nothing to do with each other, seeing their differences rather than seeing what holds us in common: our humanity, the reality that we are all children of God. We divide people along religious beliefs and political affiliations, along their immigration status, their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their age, even where they live.

In my first congregation that I served in western Kansas, one of the local boys went off to college and met a young woman who had grown up in the city. When she came to meet his parents, because they were getting pretty serious, she encountered all these new things on the farm and thoroughly enjoyed these new experiences. But afterwards they came to tell me that they were quite concerned about their son becoming too serious with what they called a "city slicker." It was just going to be too different. It would never work out. They got married, and to this day they're just fine.

I understand why we put people into categories. It's easier to deal with groups and then just make assumptions, rather than engaging people in their own uniqueness and complexities, which can be part of the group that they belong to. But we don't just put people in categories, do we? We take a further step. We put them into categories and then we move the box that we have put them in away from our box, and the divide gets even larger. But Jesus (remember, the good news always starts with Jesus) comes along, and he not only ignores the dividing lines, the barriers, the categories, but he crosses right over them, to connect people who are on the other side. In seminary I had a professor who said that we need to be very careful when we divide people into "us" and "them" because Jesus is always on the other side with "them." I've heard that phrase many times, and it has always stuck with me. And we see that truth over and over again throughout the gospel, Jesus including those who have been excluded: tax collectors and women and lepers and Samaritans, and eating with them and touching them and teaching them and calling them and becoming one of them. He hung on the cross between two thieves. So that there's no longer an "us" and a "them" but a "we" — a we, who are part of the reign of God where there are no dividing lines. Not only does Jesus, in his actions interacting with the woman at the well, show us what the reign of God looks like, but Jesus also enables us to participate in that reign by offering us living water. "The water I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life, so that we might experience the reign of God." I came across a wonderful image as I was working on this sermon. And it said (an author wrote): living water can purify our hearts of hatred and hostilities, and form us into a diverse people of God on earth.

During the season of Lent, we focus on honestly confessing our sins, owning our baggage — which includes our own prejudice and fear and hatred and insecurity. The living water not only cleanses us of that, but actually wells up in us, so that we can grow in ways that are beyond what we might imagine, growing in ways that connect us to God, that connect us to one another, that connect us to the world, growing in ways so that we understand that the eternal life that we are offered in Jesus is all about relationships. No wonder that the woman, after experiencing this relationship with Jesus, this understanding of life that connected her to something more, went and told her friends and said you've got to come, hear this, and know this. This is the savior of the world. Wow. In the midst of everything that's going on, this gospel reminds us that Jesus is in our midst, building bridges across our fears, our anxiety, our worries particularly in this time, to connect us to one another, even in times when we may not be able to be physically connected.

And that, my friends, is a great job description for a pastor. Pastors are called to proclaim the gospel,

the good news which builds bridges and connects us, not only to each other, but to the whole church and the wider community. Pastors are called to have these theological conversations. So when a pastor brings up God, yeah that's part of our job. So that we can talk with one another about our relationship with God which connects us to one another, so that we can actually be honest about our own fears and prejudices, our own hostilities. We all have them. Pastors are the ones that call us into these confessions, that both challenge and comfort us, to get out of our boxes and connect in wonderfully diverse ways.

But pastors do not do this in isolation. They do this in partnership, in mutuality with all of you. Did you notice, at the beginning of our gospel story, that Jesus went to the woman and asked her to give him something to drink? It was a mutual ministering and serving one another back and forth. And did you notice who it was that went and told all the other neighbors about Jesus? It wasn't Jesus. It was a woman. Jesus empowered the woman to become an evangelist. So while it is a pastor's call to proclaim the good news, it is a call of all of us to be evangelists, to share the good news. Think about all the bridges that we can build together. Think about the ways that we can share the living water. Think about the impact we can make. That's what this is all about. That's what we are celebrating, even in the midst of everything else going on.

So my friends, my partners in ministry, let us move forward — not only in this new relationship, but during this season of Lent and even during this time of a pandemic. Let us move forward, continuing to care for one another, continuing to connect to one another, continuing to be a strong witness to the good news, to be refreshing and life-giving sources of hope and comfort. How appropriate — I know this is not what you signed up for, Pastor (like you said, it's your third Sunday) — but how appropriate that at this time, in these circumstances, during this season, you began this new relationship to participate in God's activity and mission. Because my friends, the world needs us. The world needs you. This is our time to be the people of God, and together be proclaimers and builders of hope.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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