

Lent 3A
The Rev. Emily Richards
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Love Overcomes Fear

Last Sunday I was preparing myself to begin a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with our Bishop and many others in our Diocese. We had planned to spend this morning worshipping at a Palestinian Episcopal Church in Ramallah. Instead, here I am in our lovely chapel with my husband, and daughter and the caretaker of our church as we gather to pray with all of you virtually. It's hard to wrap my mind around everything that has occurred in the span of one week. It is so surreal! What an extraordinary time this is for us as a community, a nation and as a global society. This pandemic has generated an increased sense of fear and isolation. Over the past few days leaders of St. Peter's have gathered in video chats, and through emails to discuss how we can stay connected as a parish family ~ how to look out for one another and love each other in the midst of this crisis. And how we can continue to care for our neighbors who are already so vulnerable; and honestly, made more vulnerable by this outbreak. The question that keeps returning to me is how do we remain safe while also not allowing the fear or isolation to overwhelm us as people of faith?

I am no stranger to these feelings. As a person living with a physical disability brought on by a childhood illness, I know a thing or two about fear and isolation. Afraid of not being able to do the things that my friends and siblings were able to do. Afraid that the next surgery wasn't going to help me walk better or the pain might never go away. These fears amplified the loneliness brought about by isolation. Stuck at home recovering from surgery while the world beyond my house was continuing on without me. But it wasn't just my own experience. I observed how these feelings were manifested in those who loved me the most. How isolating it was at times for my parents and brothers because no one really knew what it was like for them and much of the care and attention was focused on me.

And then there was the fear and isolation that I encountered among my neighbors - people I came in contact with on a daily basis who didn't know me or my story. Anyone living with an illness or disability has this invisible circle drawn around them; and consciously or unconsciously their neighbors stand beyond that line keeping you at a safe distance. Because, God forbid they or someone they love may end up in a wheelchair or with your illness. We've all experienced the power of fear and how it can isolate us from

one another. My guess is that each of us has perpetuated it and also been a recipient of it, keeping us from loving ourselves and loving our neighbor as Jesus tells us.

John's passage this morning responds directly to the power fear holds over us. It is the longest recorded conversation with an individual that Jesus had in any of the gospels. And surprisingly, it is with an unnamed woman, a stranger. She's an outsider - marginalized from her community. An individual with her own invisible circle drawn around her. Fear and isolation are her companions. When Jesus first comes upon her, she is alone - collecting water for her household long after all the other women had come and gone. She can't be a part of the daily ritual at sunrise, but instead has to carry out this task in the heat of the day with no one for companionship. She has three strikes against her. She is female; she has a dubious relationship history; and she is a Samaritan, considered a half breed, even an enemy to the Jewish people. But none of this is of consequence to Jesus.

In fact, it is Jesus who seeks her out. In plain sight, Jesus sits there engrossed in conversation with this outsider. "When she steps back, he steps toward her. When she steps out of the light, he steps into it, writes Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor. "He will not let her retreat. If she is determined to show him less of herself, then he will show her more of himself. 'I know that Messiah is coming,' she says, and he says, 'I am he.' It is the first time he has said that to another living soul. It is a moment of full disclosure, in which the triple outsider and the Messiah of God stand face to face with no pretense about who they are. Both stand fully lit at high noon for one bright moment in time, while all the rules, taboos and history that separate them fall forgotten to the ground."

As these two engage in the dance of conversation, striving to listen and learn, to be heard and understood by the other, something astonishing happens. Jesus tells her the truth about her life in a way that no one ever has before. And in turn, she reveals the truth about him. The woman at the well who is thirsty for connection meets someone who dares to step inside that invisible circle and break down those barriers that keep her isolated. "By confirming her true identity, he reveals his own, and that is how it still happens," believes Taylor. "The Messiah is the one in whose presence you know who you really are—the good, the bad, the all of it, the hope in it. The Messiah is the one who shows you who you are by showing you who he is— who crosses all boundaries, breaks all rules, drops all disguises—speaking to you like someone you have known all your life, bubbling up in your life like a well that needs no dipper."

The power of human connection, of seeing another human being not as "the other" to be feared, but as one to be encountered. What I have come to learn in my forty-eight years

on this earth as a woman living with a disability is that the invisible circles we draw around one other are not real. We make them up thinking that they will keep us safer. Thinking that our fears will be kept at bay. When in fact our fears only grow stronger as we manufacture more circles. The words, "Be not afraid" are found in the Bible 365 times. Why? Because as human beings we are so afraid. And fear gets in the way of the abundant life Jesus invites us to share with him and with one another.

In this extraordinary time when the most responsible thing to do is to practice social distancing and self-isolation for the sake of the safety of our communities, maybe God is beckoning us to get creative in our understanding of how to be the Body of Christ. Like live streaming your service on Facebook! Maybe we are being invited to step out with Jesus into the light and destroy all those barriers that don't really keep us safe but keep us trapped in the darkness. That end up keeping us from really knowing and loving one another.

Last week at this time I thought I'd be experiencing the Judean desert, on a journey with fellow pilgrims into unknown places as we followed the way of Jesus. I realize now that I'm not in that different of a place. I journey with all of you my sisters and brothers into a landscape we've never encountered. We do not know what lies ahead. Days and possibly months filled with great challenges and also great opportunities. So, we pray in this moment and then work to act on behalf of our sisters and brothers who are suffering tremendously because of this pandemic. And we rise to meet the challenges and be open to the opportunities by journeying with Jesus trusting that his way will guide us into springs of living water. Trusting also that as we step out with him and with each other, we will dwell securely in the promise that love overcomes fear. Amen.