

Faith Mennonite Church
March 20, 2011
Lent 2: Becoming Human: Shaped through Thirst
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Meeting at the well, becoming one flesh
Genesis 2:18-19a,20b-25; John 4:3-30, 39

A couple years ago when Katie Hochstedler was living with us, while studying culinary arts, she entered a cooking contest. On the day of the contest she was given a set of ingredients from which to design a menu and prepare a meal in a proscribed time frame. She won the contest, which wasn't a surprise to Gerald and me, since we had been enjoying her creative combinations. She liked to take what was in the refrigerator and on the pantry shelves and create new, savory (and usually spicy hot!) dishes.

I've worked with a similar challenge this week as I've wanted to honor the Lent journey we began last Sunday and also reflect on the topic of marriage. I will admit to playing with the ingredients—choosing one text from the Lenten lectionary (the story of the woman at the well) and another that has been central to a Christian understanding of the mystery of marriage—of two persons becoming one flesh.

Although we read the Genesis text first, I'd like to begin with the story of the woman at the well. Most preachers, I would guess, would not choose this as the ideal text to preach about marriage. A quick reading of this text suggests this woman was a failure when it came to marriage and we don't usually use stories of failure as models of success. But let the story simmer for awhile, and we find a lot of food for thought.

The woman meets Jesus at the well. It's the middle of the day and the sun is bright. As a child I was taught that this meant the woman was a sinner, so full of shame that she couldn't come to the well with the respectable women in the early morning when it was cool. That may well be, but in John's gospel, encounters with Jesus that take place in the light signify understanding on the part of the person Jesus talks to. (Next week we'll have the contrasting story of Nicodemus, who seeks Jesus out at night, under the cover of darkness.)

All around the world and throughout time, wells have been a place where people go to draw water, to quench thirst and to use for cooking and cleaning. In the Old Testament, wells were also places where matches were made. In fact, any Jewish reader or listener to this story, hearing that this was Jacob's well, would immediately remember that the patriarch Jacob first met Rachel, who later became his wife, at a well. And, years earlier, when Jacob's grandfather Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Jacob's father Isaac, the first encounter also took place at a well. Rebecca was tending her family's sheep and had brought them to the well for water. The servant asked her for a drink and soon thereafter, he asked her family to allow her to go and marry Isaac.

So when Jesus asked the woman for water, she could have understood his words as a come on—as a marriage proposal! She's baffled; Jewish men wouldn't usually talk to a woman, particularly a Samaritan, who didn't have the protection of another man. Yet, Jesus engaged her; he wanted to connect with her deepest, spiritual thirst. He opened the topic of her marital status, but not to shame or judge her. His matter-of-fact handling of the matter suggests that he wasn't shocked or dismayed. Indeed, she may well have been victim rather than unfaithful. In the system of levirate marriage, if a man died before his wife bore a child, his brother was required to marry her and sire children in the dead brother's name. The mention of multiple husbands echoes a story that is told in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) where the Sadducees (who didn't believe in an afterlife) posed a trick question for Jesus:

Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children; and the second married her and died, leaving no children; and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.' (Mark 12:19-23)

If such a case would actually happen, we would expect that some of the brothers would already be married when they accepted the responsibility of marrying their brothers' widow. And so the husband she would have had would not have been her own.

Despite her situation, or perhaps *because* of her situation, Jesus takes special interest in this woman, not to exploit her but to engage in serious conversation. He lets her know that the most important thing in life is not marital status, not meeting our physical thirst—for water or touch—but rather our connection and communion with the Water of Life, Jesus, who connects us with our heavenly parent.

Jesus trusted this woman. He did not preach a moralistic sermon; he did not ask her to repent, but called her to a whole life commitment of worship in spirit and truth. She was so taken with what he said that she left her water jar behind (much like the disciples had earlier left their nets and their tax booths to follow Jesus). She returned to her towns people and said “come and see,” the same words of invitation that Jesus used in the first chapter of John when he called his disciples. Her encounter with Jesus reoriented her life. She moved from the woman with five husbands and counting to the woman who helped her village believe in Jesus.

In the adult education discussions about singleness in the past two weeks, one of the themes that I heard, both in the presentation by the Benedictine sisters and also in the panel of persons from our congregation, was that of learning to live in and find satisfaction in the present moment. In the outline that Sr. Theresa left, she describes moving from “loneliness to solitude” where one frees ones true self to flower and grow. In a similar way, the word from Jesus in this story is that regardless of our state, whether we are single or coupled, we will be most healthy and whole, as individuals and as people in many different kinds of relationships, as we draw our first nourishment from the Water of Life.

Two weeks ago, Phil concluded his sermon on singleness by proclaiming, as the three monotheistic religions do, that *God is one*. At the same time, this one God, as described in the first chapter of Genesis, speaks in plural form, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image.” The Christian doctrine of the trinity, of one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, describes a God who is, in essence, relational. So it is not surprising that in the second creation account, in Genesis two, (which we read this morning) we find that a human all alone needs a helper as a partner. The Hebrew word used for “helper” in this instance does not describe a lower-status servant but rather an equal who pushes up against and supports. Indeed this word “helper” is the word that some of the Psalm writers used when calling out to God to be a “helper” in trouble.

The Genesis narrative goes on to describe another mathematical mystery. These two helpers are not merely colleagues and collaborators. They relationally become “one flesh.” Although the term marriage is not used here, the editor describes the ensuing process whereby, generation after generation, two persons leave their parents and form a new union. And for the original couple, being naked, fully disclosed to one another, entailed no shame.

We need to take these words seriously as we consider the meaning of marriage and sexual relations because Jesus quoted these words from Genesis in one of the few times he spoke about marriage. He chose these words to respond to a question from the Pharisees about the dissolution of marriage. While we know that Jesus practiced and taught the advantage of remaining single (as did

the Apostle Paul as well), his response to the Pharisees indicated that he regarded the marriage covenant as something enduring, as something more than a contract, for the two had become one.

Marriage has taken various forms throughout history, some of which are found in the Bible. Marriage has usually been shaped by economic and political systems: royalty and families of wealth would arrange marriages to secure their power. This happened in the church in the middle ages, and the practice of celibacy for priests actually developed as a corrective to the power that had developed in families of priests. In many forms of marriage women were (and are) considered property, passed from one owner (her father) to another (her husband). In polygamous societies, men could gain power through wives and children (and women could also benefit by sharing the highly-labor-intensive work of farming and food preparation). In parts of the Christian world double standards created systems in which the wife was primarily the mother of children and a symbol of purity, while the husband would find pleasure in a mistress.

In our post-modern, post-industrial, consumer society, sex has in many ways become a commodity and marriage a contract. Sex is entertaining, it is used to sell products, it is marketed and trafficked, cruelly enslaving many women, children and youth of both genders. It is often casual and for many it is considered a prerequisite for marriage as if sexual compatibility were *the* determining factor in the success of a marriage.

Marriage as contract is an attempt to protect the interests of each individual. As long as both parties are satisfied, the contract is renewed. But if one party loses interest or finds a more appealing partner, the contract can be dissolved and a new contract sought.

Linking sexual relationships and marriage in the belief that there is something of God, something divine, that makes two persons one is based on the notion of covenant, of deep commitment, of enduring faithfulness that we receive as a gift of God. We learn to love and to enjoy the bodies of our partners *because* we have made the commitment to remain together for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death. A covenant of marriage, entered into in the midst of a faith community creates a communal bond that is stronger than a civil contract between two individuals. The married couple is accountable to the community; and each of us in the community shares responsibility in supporting the couple and their children, just as we bear responsibility in supporting single persons in their opportunities and challenges we discussed last week.

We live in a culture of many mixed messages. On the one hand, marriage is dismissed as being irrelevant or constraining. On the other hand, marriage is glamorized, and weddings extravagant. Here in Minneapolis the majority of couples getting married, according to market surveys, spend between \$15,000 and \$26,000 on their wedding, not including an engagement ring and the honeymoon, and high-end weddings easily cost twice that amount.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was engaged but was executed before he was able to marry, wrote the book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Like Anabaptists, Bonhoeffer believed that following Jesus is a costly path. The way of the cross is not just about the ultimate sacrifice of dying for ones enemies, it is the daily cost of orienting our lives toward Jesus, of challenging cultural messages that turn us away from God, of finding the way through limitation and brokenness to the richness and true meaning of life and being human.