

A Truthful Spirit

February 27, 2005

John 4:1-42

First Parish Church

© Mary E. Baard

During our years in the southwest, I learned about being thirsty. I've known a sun that is hot enough to fry a lizard's tongue, where even a very short walk can leave you desperately thirsty. From my childhood here in Maine, my strongest memories of a blazing sun and a dry throat come from the days of raking blueberries up on the barrens in Washington County. I'm curious how many of you have raked blueberries?

My mother grew up in Washington County. Her grandfather and father owned blueberry land and ran a small blueberry factory. When I was only two, her father died. In the following years, we went to Harrington each August to rake blueberries and so my father could run the factory.

We didn't rake with the big crews. My cousins and our family would rake plots that were too small for the big crews. Many of us were quite young so we would only work until early afternoon. I remember not only the hot sun, but also the smell of the fields and the ache in my back and arms. I also remember my curiosity about the Native American families who lived in the "camps" on the barrens.

They were migrant workers who came just for the harvest. I think they were mostly from the Micmac tribe. My family always spoke of them kindly, but we never interacted with them. They worked with the large crews. It wasn't until much later that I realized that they probably looked at us as

being the owners, for my grandmother owned the land.

From living in the west, I've become more aware of the issues of migrant workers, the complexity of "land ownership" in relationship to Native tribes, and the vicious and brutal racism with regards to native peoples that is part of our heritage as a country.

Immigrants to American over the last three to four hundred years have had complex relationship to the tribes that were already living here, ranging from romanticizing the life of Indians to seeking to exterminate their presence. I was reminded of this heritage this week in looking at a new publication of *The Song of Hiawatha*. As you probably know, Brunswick is celebrating Longfellow Days this weekend. In his poem, Longfellow hoped to honor the life of the native peoples. However, not everyone shared his sentiments. The poem, published in 1855, received a "decidedly mixed reception." The *Boston Traveler* reported: "*We cannot help but express our regret that our own pet national poet should not have selected as a theme of his muse something better and higher than the silly legends of the savage aborigines.*" (2004 edition, David R. Godine, Publisher, back cover)

We humans seem to have an uncanny propensity for an "us" versus "them" mentality. Sometimes it is expressed in a cordial distance and other times it erupts with a vengeance. The list of such conflicts

is endless in human history but it does include:

- European settlers and Native tribes
- One native tribe against another (even long before the Europeans came)
- owners versus workers
- and the multitude of religious conflicts between and among the world's religions.

In biblical times, we could have added Jews and Samaritans to the list. Today, we think of Samaritans as good people – people who will go out of their way to help others. In fact, we speak of the “good” Samaritan. In many places, including Phoenix, we name our hospitals after this parable. Ah, but I am sad to tell you that in Jesus' day, some Jews would have been heard to say *the only good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan*. In Jesus' day it would have been considered an oxymoron to put the words “good” and “Samaritan” together.

There is nothing worse than a family feud, and in some respects, that is what was going on between Jews and Samaritans. They had ancestral roots that were interwoven. The Samaritans, who lived in a region between Judea and Galilee, were mixed remnants of the northern tribes. Like the Jews, they worshipped the Lord God and used the Pentateuch. However, the Samaritans had developed a cultic center on Mount Gerizim and claimed it as the central place of worship in contrast to the Jews' claim that Jerusalem was the true location of the Temple of God. Over the years, the enmity grew and grew. Jews held the Samaritans in contempt, seeing them as religious apostates.

I got a sense of the intense emotions behind this division when, twenty years ago, during the Iran hostage crisis, I retold the story of the Good Samaritan to a church group. I told it so that it was the “good Iranian” who

helped the wounded man. Do you remember the public sentiment about Iran at the time? If you do, then it won't surprise you to hear that, after I told the story, a woman came up to me and she was livid. The veins were popping out on her head. She couldn't believe I had the audacity (and I think she thought stupidity) to transform the Good Samaritan into the Good Iranian. It was a very painful moment for her. It was not a fun moment for me. However, it was an AHA moment for me. Some of the Jews must have been just as livid when Jesus told them the story of the Good Samaritan.

So when, in today's lesson, we see Jesus sitting down with a *Samaritan* and a Samaritan *woman* at that, it's a big deal. It's a very big deal. We've got the two big taboos going on here – religion and politics. It's not like Jesus just wandered into Brunswick stopped into the Bohemian Coffee House for a quick Gatorade after a long hike, and happened into a pleasant conversation with one of the patrons there.

Whereas in last week's story of Nicodemus, we saw Jesus talking with one of his own, in today's story we see Jesus moving out of the confines of traditional Judaism and encountering one who would have been reckoned an outsider and even an enemy.

It's bad enough that the one he talks to at the well is a Samaritan, but, to add insult to injury, she's a woman. As a Jewish man Jesus shouldn't be initiating a conversation with an unknown woman. Moreover, as a Jewish teacher he shouldn't be talking with a woman in public. In fact, why was he wasting his time with a woman anyway? The sages of his day were known to say: *He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself.* (*New Interpreter's Bible, IX.*

Pg. 565) Ironically, Jesus does talk a great deal to this woman. It is one of the longest dialogues in the gospel. Instead of bringing evil, it is an encounter filled with grace and hope.

Jesus arrives physically thirsty, and the woman comes spiritually thirsty as we can hear in her questions and comments. Just as he did with Nicodemus, Jesus invites the Samaritan woman into deeper reflection and engagement on the spiritual journey. He offers her “living water.”

This is another one of those multi-faceted words that the writer of the gospel of John so likes. Last week in the story of Nicodemus, the word *anōthen* meant both “reborn” and “from above.” In today’s lesson the words translated “living water” also has two meanings. It can mean fresh, running water – in other words, spring water rather well water. Jesus draws those meanings together when he says, “the water that I give will become... a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

There are other things going on in their story that we don’t have time to explore today.

- the strange references to the woman’s marital status
- the woman’s witnessing to others about Jesus.

However, the disciples reaction when they return (which we did not read) is one of profound dis-ease with Jesus interaction with a woman and a Samaritan. It points out what I think is one of the central messages of this story. Jesus refuses to accept the cultural, political and religious boundaries of his day. What an extraordinary witness! With a truthful spirit he engages any and all who cross his path.

He calls them to worship God, who he says is spirit. God is spirit – in other words, not bound to any place or any people. Jesus refuses to accept all the things that divide us. Indeed “thirst does make friends of us all.” Jesus offers everyone living water – life and new life.

Since returning to Maine, I’ve been asking a number of people about the connections and conversations between the Christian community and the native tribes in Maine. Sometimes I’ve gotten blank stares. I’ve gotten a couple of leads of people who are involved in this ministry. On Thursday, I met a woman who lives in the area. She is a member of two tribes in the west and a Christian. She also has contact with tribes here in Maine. I hope to learn more from her.

In contrast to Longfellow’s amalgamation of Indian traditions in his poem *Hiawatha*, Native tribes want us to realize that they each have their own distinct identity. However, one common thread many have recognized in Native American spiritualities is their deep respect and reverence for the earth. In recent times, this has been a particularly crucial witness to the Christian community. Indeed they have helped us to reclaim the best of Christian stewardship that we might remember that we need to care for the earth so that we might leave for our children “living water” – fresh running water, literally, as well as to tell our children the stories of the life-giving water of the spirit.