

LIVING IN THE HEART: ACCEPTANCE

John 4:5-30

(Samaritan woman making rose water with a cover on her hair)

Samaritan Woman: Good morning! I am glad you came to see me this morning. I hope that you don't mind me working here as we visit. I have several things to take care of. I am making some rose water. It is how I make my living these days. It is a hard process and it takes a lot of work and the season for the right flowers is often short, but I love making this water because it reminds me of my encounter with Jesus at the well near my village. I am the Samaritan woman you just read about. I don't know why Jesus was going through Samaria because normally Jews like him, especially teachers, rarely wanted to be in our part of the world. But all I know is that meeting him changed my life forever. Every day I went to the well to get my water and often times I went during the hot hours of the day to avoid the other women who always shamed me. But that day when I met Jesus I got the best water of all. I got the water of life. For the first time I knew that my life was worth something and that I was loved and accepted by God.

(Another woman of her time marches in and stands or sits back to back with the Samaritan woman)

Another Woman: She was always different. She always liked to get attention.

SW: I often thought that I was insignificant and no one would ever respect me.

AW: She was a nobody who came from a poor family from the wrong part of town.

SW: I was so different from the other women that I was even embarrassed to be in any social events. I avoided going to the well when the other women went. The way they looked at me made me feel that I wanted to disappear. They slashed me with their eyes and they whipped me with their tongues.

AW: She just wanted us to accept her like she was one of us. But we knew better and we let her know her place!

SW: They thought I chose my life because I enjoyed it. I was born into my social class and forced into marrying all these men. That was the only way I was able to have male protection after my poor father died. Women are not allowed to live alone in my culture.

AW: Nothing about her was acceptable in my culture. You take our rules or you leave them. You can't have it any other way.

SW: But this Jewish teacher, Jesus, whom I met at the well, saw my heart. He didn't care about my race, gender, or social class.

AW: And then she claimed to have a transforming encounter with God through one of the Jewish teachers who were passing by.

SW: He was the only one that allowed me to stop hiding and to be myself.

AW: She went around telling everyone to believe in him wanting us not only to believe her but also to believe in a Jewish teacher. She just had no common sense!

SW: All my fears disappeared through the living water of God's love that Jesus offered me. No more shame and no more pain.

AW: Why should we the enemies of the Jews believe in one of them as a prophet? Why should we who knew who she was, believe that a decent man, especially a prophet and a teacher would even talk to her?

SW: I was filled with joy and my heart was overflowing with streams of life and love. I knew I couldn't live in fear any more. No more hiding from others! No more staying away.

AW: The most awful thing for me is that many believed her. How could they? They were swept away by her enthusiasm and stories about faith and forgiveness. Did they forget who she was? Didn't they realize that she was using them?

SW: All I wanted was given to me and my being different became an important part of my message to the people of my town. They were amazed at the love of God being given to someone like me.

AW: People believed her lies and she made money and became accepted in our society. She even had her own brand of rose water called, "Living Water." But this kind of thing does not fool me. I know the truth. I know who she is and no "living water" is going to change that for me.

SW: Praise God for the gift of Jesus Christ, the living water, who brings life to our death, love to our hate, joy to our sorrow, and affirmation to our unique stories.

The kingdom Jesus inaugurated is a realm of inclusion not exclusion, dignity not denigration, empowerment rather than exploitation, and affirmation rather than marginalization. It is a kingdom of faith and acceptance not of judgment and separation. Faith in God leads us to let go of our judgments about other people's moral character, race, culture, etc.

The power of judging others is all too often with us. We are ready to judge or mistrust those who are different from us or those who behave in ways we disagree with. We are ready to judge even those who have different views on life. I often get this remark from people when they find out that I am Syrian American, "You don't look Syrian," as if all Syrians should look one way.

One of the things I like about Lake Wobegon, that creation of storyteller Garrison Keillor, is that it often illustrates two things about small town life—and life in general. The first is that in a small town, you can be reasonably sure that everyone knows your history as well as the latest news about you, maybe even before you know it yourself. The second is that knowing the history or the latest news about someone is not the same as truly knowing them. We can't lock people into boxes of belief, morality, race, gender or anything else for that matter. The minute we start judging the other is the very minute we separate ourselves from God. As part of living in the heart, in our own hearts and in the heart of God, we live in a place of love and acceptance. Yet, once we forget that connection, we find ourselves judging and living in the illusion that we are truly separate from others. Judging others sometimes even feels good because it gives us that feeling of a higher moral standing. Yet, that same voice that is within us judging others, is also judging us. Most people I know who are able to accept and love others, are people who truly know how to love themselves and accept who they are as children of God.

Maybe you are thinking that this does not apply to you. But take a moment to be honest with yourself and think about these questions. Who are the people we judge today as outcasts or unacceptable in our society and in our world? Who are the people that you judge in your life? Do you judge yourself? You might say, this is great, but what about right and wrong? What about the moral laws of the world? What about those who truly deserve to be judged: the criminals, the crooks, the thieves? I believe that the message of the Gospel for us is very clear. Jesus didn't necessarily approve of the Samaritan's woman's choices and behavior but he never judged her. He didn't get into the details of why she might be unacceptable and why she married all these men. Jesus knew that judging others never leads to any transformation or healing. It only leads us to separation from

others and God. Seeking justice or reform is very different from judging others. Seeking justice or reform is the work of the Spirit that leads us to serve others and to work for a better world for all. Judgment is the work of our egos that separate us from others and lead us to more divisions. There is no room in God's light and love for judgment and separation. One clue for us is that most of our judgments of others are taught to us. We are not born with them. Judging others is not a gift from God. It is a coping skill we learn from our society.

In their book, *"If Grace Is True"* Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland who are both pastors tell their struggle with judging others. As one of them is summoned to the hospital because of the death of one of his church members, Sally, the pastor struggled with thinking about her memorial service as she was not a "good" person according to the standards of society. Here are some of the pastor's thoughts. "In preparing the eulogy I learned many secrets about this woman whom I'd often judged, sometimes condemned, and never respected. I discovered her life had been as cruel as her death. I realized my opinion of Sally had been unfair. At her funeral, I would bury my self-righteousness and arrogance. I would leave next to the flowers arranged around her grave a belief I'd held since I was a child... I was torn. I'd once thought hell a fitting end to her life. But when I learned more about her, that judgment troubled me. Sally had spent her life climbing out of hell. How could I wish for her return? Though it defied the formula I'd been taught, I wanted God to be gracious to Sally. My scorn gave way to sympathy."

As you face the temptation of judging others or as you hear the judgments of our world of the outcasts in our society, I invite you to check in with your heart. The season of Lent is about our journey inward toward the cross with Christ to face the injustices of our world. I invite you on this journey to go into the depth of God's love in your heart. And maybe for one week, just for this coming week, every time you hear or make a judgment take it to your heart to the fountain of God's love and acceptance. Acceptance and faith always allow the room for our world to be transformed through the power of love. William Sloan Coffin once wrote, "We all belong one to another. That's the way God made us. Christ died to keep us that way. Our sin is only and always that we put asunder what God has joined together." May the story of the Samaritan woman be a beacon of hope for reconciliation in our lives and in our world. Amen.