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Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 12 March, Lent 3, Peter’s last service at St Philip

Rev Canon Peter Parker

Starts: 34:35

<https://youtu.be/QhMxv7y3tc8?t=2076>

I speak to you now in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

We know this woman at the well. We've heard her story explained before. She is at the well in the heat of noon because she is shunned by the women of the village who fetched their water in the cool of the morning, the women of the village where she has been married to five of the men, and is now living common-law with a sixth. We know this woman lives surrounded by barriers imposed by her culture, barriers between women and men, between Samaritans and Jewish people, between the married and the unmarried, and certainly barriers between the supposedly upright and the supposedly sinful. For reasons no one knows she lives life at a very earthly and physical level. In this incident she is getting water for her normal and predictable body thirst.

When we encounter people in this way, being told all about them, we often respond accordingly. We have neat boxes in which to place people, and we certainly have a box for the woman at the well. We may be able to rationalize her situation, and speculate about how she got to this place in her life. But in our heart of hearts, we say, “Ahah. What does she expect, living like that?” In spite of our best efforts to be sensitive and compassionate, what we often do inside is we harden our hearts. Why else do you suppose the disciples didn't dare ask Jesus why he was speaking to a Samaritan woman? They had been with him enough to know that there was nothing they could say without revealing the truth of their hard hearts.

Paragraph this is one of the fatal diseases for the Christian, the God lover, the follower of Jesus: hardness of heart. I don't mean arteriosclerosis, though there is expert medical opinion that a good deal of hardening of the arteries that people suffer can be traced to emotional wounds and bitterness. Hardness of heart can be fatal. Those of us who grew up in the ‘old’ Anglican churches used to repeat that line, “Harden not your hearts as in the provocation, as in that day of temptation in the wilderness.” Harden not your hearts. Yet we seem only too ready to harden our hearts against others. The Anglican church is one of the churches that hardened its heart against the First Nations people, against their spiritual and cultural practices when the missionaries arrived. The Anglican church for decades held a hardness of heart against those of differing sexual orientation. Some still do.

Our Bible readings today press us in the opposite direction, away from hardness of heart. First we had the image of water flowing from the rock: the people were in the Sinai desert, a hot dry place where dehydration can come on with alarming speed. The people of Israel had reason to complain – there were babies, there were animals. But the Hebrew theologians who wrote down the story of this ancient memory seized upon it to show the contrast of hearts filled with anger and complaint against God, and Moses’ heart filled with faith in God. Those two hearts are as different as rock and the miraculous spring of water that Moses found at God's bidding.

John, in his recording of the conversation between Jesus and the woman of Samaria at Jacob's well, paints a picture of hearts open and opening. The first implication of just how open is Jesus’ heart, is in her incredulous question: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a woman, of Samaria, for water?” The unspoken line is, “Why isn't your heart hardened against me like all the other Jewish hearts, and like the hearts of all the other men I have known?” Why has she been dumped by five men? Is it not because their hearts were not open enough to hear her pain and loneliness, to set aside their own agendas and listen to her? Why have the village of her women of her village shunned her? Is it not because their hearts are hardened with jealousy and resentment? When she no longer served their purposes, the men wrote her a certificate of divorce. I’m embarrassed as a man to say that women are still abused by men with hard hearts.

Jesus tells her, The water that I will give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life... with this water, you will never thirst again.” We recall the day of the festival, when Jesus said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” The spirit of God flows from a heart that is broken open, softened, transformed from rock into flesh. We are reminded of Ezekiel writing, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” The hearts that God needs on the face of this earth are not hardened hearts, but open hearts, hearts from which God's Holy Spirit of love and compassion and forgiveness and healing can flow as lifegiving waters. Jesus knew that this woman's heart was broken; and the heart that is broken is ready to be open and vulnerable, not hard and with bitter defences. It was her open heart that allowed her to go bravely into the village that had rejected her, and proclaim the Messiah. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!”

St Paul refers also to this same changed heart: “Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us... God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.“ God showed an open heart in Jesus, because God knows this world does not need closed, hard hearts. It is grace, God's undeserved love, that enables us to lose, gradually, over time, the hardness of our hearts. God's grace, which comes first. We don't earn God's grace by deciding to open our hearts to Jesus. Even if we do decide to open our hearts to Jesus, we are still going to make hard-hearted mistakes. It's grace that keeps opening our hearts. A Scottish theologian once said to our summer school class, “Grace is not about us getting it right, it's about God loving us while we're getting it wrong.”

Jesus came new paragraph that we should have springs of living water flow out from our hearts. God, the source of all life and all love, sent the Son that we might have life. Why ever would we harden our hearts against the lifegiving waters of God's precious love for us? Why would we ever close our hearts to another human being, a sister or brother who, like us, is created in God's image? No matter the wounds we carry, no matter how thirsty we are for love and companionship and hope, our God can bring water from the rock, life from all the dead places in our hearts.

Last week I promised you another story about a new minister. Her first Sunday was the day of the annual parish outdoor service and barbecue at the lake. The altar Guild had brought the vessels and set a table; There were guitars for the hymns, and an order of service in every hand. After a great sermon and a joyful communion service, the hamburgers and hot dogs were served, and the ice cream, and everyone was having a wonderful time in the sunshine, and the teenagers started a game of volleyball. Someone spiked the ball, it bounced onto the water, and a breeze started carrying it across the lake. And there were no boats. What were they going to do? Consternation emerged. The new minister calmly rose from her chair, walked across the beach, walked across the water to the ball, picked it up, turned around, and walked back across the water, tossed the ball to the players and sat down. In the astonished hush that followed, old Mrs. Jones was heard saying to old Mrs. Smith, Trust the Bishop to send us a minister who can't swim!”

Next week you will meet Allen Doerksen and begin welcoming him as your new rector. I want to tell you: no matter how wonderful he is, no matter what amazing things he does, there will be some things he can't. Or won’t. First of all, he can't be Christopher Page – Bishop Anna has already assured you of that. Please, when you experience that disappointment, what’s bound to come after the honeymoon is over, do not harden your hearts. As you have learned to celebrate one another's gifts and talents, something that has impressed me about this parish, so much, and to offer your gifts when they are needed, keep that open heart. As you have opened your hearts so graciously to me, keep them open. The living water of hope and love and faith will flow in abundance into this future, a bright future for Saint Philip’s – remember what Bishop Anna said, a future which will not look like the past, but will be bright. The Samaritan woman returned to her village changed, a new person. The grace and love of God is here. Let God change your hearts.