

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT, March 15, 2020
“Walls Broken Down” (*John 4:5-30*)

As the ferry pulled into Iona, I got my first glimpse of this island off the west coast of Scotland. This island where the Irish monk, Columba, planted a monastery that became a centre of learning. This island where an ecumenical community is now based. I had long desired to delve more deeply into Celtic Christianity which stresses that God is revealed both in the little book of scripture and the big book of creation. This was my opportunity. Since I was on sabbatical, I could spend the entire Holy Week on Iona. What could be better?

My only concern was I knew absolutely no one. As we gathered, it became apparent that we were a mixed crew: there were parents with young children, a sprinkling of teens, adults - alone and in couples - ranging in age up to seniors. We came from the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, the U.S., Canada, Myanmar, Sweden and Germany. Some of us were firmly rooted in specific Christian traditions spanning the spectrum from fundamentalist to liberal. Some of us were seekers, open to exploring, and just discovering who this Jesus was and what he was about. Looking around, I couldn't imagine how we could be drawn into any sort of community.

Then I moved into Port Ban, a room I shared with five other women. Nothing like bunkbeds and shared chores - I got to clean bathrooms, and set up and clear away at lunch time - to draw individuals together. Even better were the “wee sings”. John Bell divided us into four groups, taught us our parts by rote - no music or words in front of us - and had us singing to each other and with each other in no time. “Behold, behold, I make all things new beginning with you and

starting from today.” I did indeed feel new. I could almost see the walls of gender and nationality, of age and denomination come tumbling down.

As Jesus engages the Samaritan woman in conversation, walls that divide are broken down. There is Jesus, sitting alone by a well when a lone woman approaches to draw water. According to the conventions of his first century society, Jesus as a male should not speak in public with an unrelated female. While that is still true in some cultures, what might be some other twenty-first century examples? People on the TTC - in subway cars, on buses and streetcar - normally do not speak to strangers even when crammed together like sardines. Eyes are closed or trained on screens; earbuds are tuned into music or phone conversations. People walking along the street in downtown Toronto may hear someone sitting on the sidewalk saying “spare change” or notice a sleeping bag stretched out on a heating grate, but usually they pass by without eyes meeting eyes; without any form of verbal acknowledgement. All of this concern around COVID-19 and the fear it is generating does not encourage us to draw close and converse.

Jesus is familiar with the rules, but he chooses to break them. He speaks to the woman. He addresses her not as a rabbi with something to teach or as a healer with something to give, but as a human being in need: “give me a drink.” This reminds me of the approach of a street nurse named Marion Ritchie to a street person. She didn’t tell him that he should come to her clinic based in nearby Bloor Street United Church. She didn’t even offer him a new pair or socks. She hunkered down beside him and asked him for a cigarette. He freely

gave her one. As they puffed away, they chatted. What would it be like if we were to allow ourselves to be vulnerable like that?

Jesus in his need initiates a conversation. In choosing to speak to her, he is reaching across the wall not only of gender, but also of race. He is a Jew. She is a Samaritan. They may have started off as one people, but now there is a high barrier between them. After the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, outsiders settled on the land and intermarried. As a result, Jews regard Samaritans as a mixed race. Historically, Samaritans did not support the people of Jerusalem when the returning exiles wanted to rebuild the walls of their city and temple. Religiously, Samaritans only accept as scripture the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, while Jews include the prophets and writings. Jews worship in the temple in Jerusalem. Samaritans, in their temple on Mount Gerizim. Samaritans and Jews are bitterly estranged much as Catholics and Protestants were in Northern Ireland or as fundamentalists and liberals are at times within Judaism, Christianity or Islam or as family members can be when parents disown their children or siblings refuse to have anything to do with one another.

Even when the woman reminds Jesus of who he is - a Jew who should never drink from a Samaritan's water jar - Jesus is not deterred. He goes right on speaking with her. In northern Ireland, the peace walls designed to keep Protestants and Catholics separated still exist. They were erected during the Troubles, starting in 1969, and only increasing in height and number following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. While these physical walls remain, there is now

a Shared Education programme, part of an initiative across northern Ireland to bring young people from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds together. In Lurgan, for example, Catholic and Protestant young people went on a bus together, around their town, and rated how safe they felt in different areas. The result was not only a map of Lurgan's invisible sectarian segregation, but also friendships between young people the same age, living in same town, who otherwise would never have met. Walls broken down.

Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman in a way reminiscent of his conversation with Nicodemus. He reaches across not only society's walls of gender and race, but also the defensive walls this woman has apparently built around herself. Notice the time she comes to draw water - noon. Who would choose to walk out to a well; descend the circular stairs down into it; fill a jug with water, and then carry it up the steps and back into town with the sun, high overhead, beating down? There is reason behind the saying: "only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun." Notice: she is alone. Day in, day out, it is women's responsibility to fetch water. Going together - chatting, singing, laughing, exchanging village news - is what makes this onerous task bearable. And yet, she is by herself. Is she an outcast because she has been married five times and is currently living with a man not her husband? She may be considered immoral, not the sort of individual with whom good people should associate. Or is she, as some scholars have suggested, an unfortunate bride whose husbands have died without offspring leaving her to marry brother after brother? She may have chosen to distance herself from other villagers, tired of their sideways

glances, their not so whispered comments. For whatever reason, she now seems to be an outsider.

And yet, Jesus has chosen to talk with her - not just about wells and water. Oh no, he engages her in deep theological conversation that ranges from prophets to the proper place of worship - Samaria or Jerusalem - to the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one of God. The disciples may marvel that Jesus is talking to a woman; how much more astounded they would be if they knew the subjects of their discussion. The effect on the woman is electrifying: she who has come out alone to draw water leaves her water jar, and races back to the city. There, she, the outsider, speaks to everyone and anyone to spread the news: “come, see someone who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” She is transformed. “Behold, behold, I make all things new beginning with you, and starting from today.”

I first met a young woman I'll call Samantha when she was in hospital. I knew her Mom and her bright, accomplished big sister from my congregation, but Samantha had never been active because of her physical and mental challenges. Now, she was about to age out of the educational system with no clear idea about where she would go from there. It looked as if her future might be one of isolation and aloneness. When an opportunity arose for Samantha to be part of a day programme at L'Arche Daybreak, her parents jumped at it. At least, it would keep her occupied. A few months later, Samantha was out at church. She was sitting, not with her parents, but with people from Daybreak. She was chatting and giggling with her neighbours. Time came for the Learning Together, and

Samantha came forward with an assistant. There in front of everyone, this young woman, who in company had tended to retreat into silence, now spoke. She talked about her work in the Craft Studio - how she made candles with different colours of wax, candles that bore her name as creator. With a big smile, she demonstrated her technique. Her parents beamed with pride. Being in a community which accepted her as she was, and encouraged her to become all she could be, had transformed her. "Behold, behold, I make all things new beginning with you, and starting from today."

Christ breaks down walls. Thanks be to God who entrusts us with carrying on this work. May we be united in "the common quest for self and world made new." Amen.