

Why “the Edge”?

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

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First of all, I want to comment on my overall theme for Lent, the idea that we often find Jesus on the *edges* of life. I think that it’s clear, Jesus seemed to be drawn to the fringes. His cultural norms expected Jesus to follow a certain path, but Jesus regularly journeyed outside of those norms to meet people in difficult, even forbidden, spaces.

Last week it was a religious authority who came to him by night. Nicodemus was afraid to be seen with Jesus, and Jesus in turn pushed the intellectual to the edge of his belief system. In a moment I will speak briefly about Jesus in Samaritan country, for Jews the “bad part of town”, meeting an outcasted woman.

But first, I need to say that the “edges” I’m talking about over Lent are not necessarily “places” one would go. Alternatively, they can be experiences. For example, when we go outside of our comfort zones, when our opinions are challenged or our scope of vision for our world is expanded, perhaps that is an “edge” for us.

Many of us undergo transformations in our understanding of self and of other people’s experiences that are very different from us. It is said that change often requires a crisis, a conflict, in order to push us to examine our values, see them in a new way. Jesus was not a fan of staying in the synagogue to teach, but instead taught his followers by his journey to edges.

Life circumstances can be stressful, even catalyze fear in people. Those disciples wondering where Jesus would take them next. A virus that gets promoted to the category of pandemic can push people around us to the point of hoarding toilet paper! Now before I judge people for panic buying, and perpetuating misinformation in fear, I need to recognize that we *all* are vulnerable to fear. Pushed past what we think we can handle, responding in fear, is real, it is natural, and it is ok. Seeing empty grocery store shelves triggers fear. It brings out the isolationist, individualistic, protective sides of us.

In case we find ourselves next Sunday in our homes, perhaps some of us might get those flu symptoms we hear about. I want you to remember, that you and I are not alone. Not at all! Every time that fear and uncertainty pushes us past our limit, out, way beyond the edge of our tolerance, and our emotions are frayed – let us remember these stories of Jesus in the dark with Nicodemus. There Jesus is, sitting with Nicodemus, coaxing him to think a different way.

Think about today’s paraphrase of the Samaritan story, now; a story about a person who had resigned herself to the notion that she would be an outsider, a nobody. But God through Jesus had a surprise for her. Another shocking story for the Jews of Jesus’ life who were trained to loathe Samaritans – Jesus meets her on the fringes of her life, surprises her just being willing to acknowledge her, and he calls her to a remarkable new life that I’m certain no Samaritan, nor a Jew of the time, ever saw coming.



Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Dominican Priory at Santa Sabina, Rome.

Looking at this piece of art, you might see the artist's portrayal of that woman, listening. She is also standing, and Jesus sitting. A number of the art pieces I found depicted the woman standing. I wonder if the artist imagines, as probably the storyteller, that the Samaritan woman is poised to escape if need-be out of fear. This is taboo, this encounter. Jesus would be chastised by religious leaders, but for the woman, alone, the consequences for being seen alone with a strange, Jewish man would be far greater. Nonetheless, there she is, listening, and obviously she is energized by his words because she drops her bucket of water and races home to preach.

God seems predisposed to meet people way beyond the edge. Looking to this week, knowing that circumstances will get worse before they get better – in our uncertainty, anxiety, God meets us. When we are watching people panic around us, and we feel fear well up inside of us – may we remember to breathe, to care for ourselves, our families, our neighbours, and may we remember, God is there. And when the days, weeks, maybe a few months pass and COVID-19 will ultimately as well, our understanding of “normal” might be challenged by the experiences or perspectives of others – maybe we will be changed by it.

Our new members have covenanted to study M.A.I.D., That is, “Medical Assistance In Dying” and what our United Church has to say about it. The gift of our United Church of Canada is that it, like Jesus, goes out to dangerous places, to uncertain places, to the places where people suffer, to the very edges and beyond to help us to make faithful, compassionate, even daring decisions.