

The Courage to Ask for Help

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Last week I focused on the Courage to Trust, to lean into faith rather than cynicism and bitterness that come out when fear prevails. This week: The courage to ask for Help. Let me preface this by saying, full disclosure, that I don't ask for help well. I admire the work of Brené Brown, the renowned author who champions the courage of being vulnerable. For me, I'm trying to nurture in myself many of the traits that we lift up in Lent.

Reflecting on today's readings, particularly Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well, I might assume that Jesus has already knows where the conversation was headed with the stranger. I like many Christians, learned from an early age this idea that Jesus is all-knowing, almost psychic in his ability to predict what is to come.

We might remember, though, that the "Jesus" we meet in the Gospel of John comes to us through a filter, that of the Gospel writer, as well as those in later generations who edited and retold the stories. So, given that, I wonder: What if Jesus was much less in control of everything? What if Jesus just *really needed water*, thirsty after a long walk? Perhaps that need of Jesus segued into an opportunity to talk about water – both the water he needs, and the living water that the woman craves?

Jesus as human. Vulnerable. Perhaps more equal with the woman he met than we often acknowledge? Perhaps. Does that matter, if we presume that Jesus was very human, vulnerable, and that this encounter with the woman from Samaria was one of mutuality? What presumptions we bring to our hearing of these stories of Jesus?

Too often our culture glorifies independence, self sufficiency. Researcher Brené Brown offers an interesting insight. She says:

No one reaches out to you for compassion or empathy so you can teach them how to behave better. They reach out to us because they believe in our capacity to know our darkness well enough to sit in the dark with them.¹

Jesus in his need meets the Samaritan woman in hers, each bringing both their need and their abundance to this encounter. As it turned out, the unnamed woman became a significant preacher of God's Good News of healing love in her village. I don't ponder this enough: as I try to keep it together; as I try not to show others that things aren't going so well in my life. I think we all, at times, buy into culturally-created myth that independence and self sufficiency is equivalent to strength.

It is likely not a coincidence that, in John's story here, the woman leaves her bucket (the literal water) to run to her village and share the news about "living water". Did Jesus actually get his drink? She became so excited by what Jesus offered, a vision of living water available to everyone, regardless of their peccadillos, that she completely forgot about the real water she was getting.²

¹ *The Power of Vulnerability: Teachings of Authenticity, Connections and Courage*. An audio resource by Brene Brown. © 2013 Sounds True

² Rolf Jacobson observes this interesting detail of the story on WorkingPreacher.org (March 5, 2023) in his Dear Preacher blog entitled "In-Between Places"

There is a great deal of risk here. At a well, which is suggested by one scholar to have been an archetype in the Bible for places where people meet who eventually marry one another.³ No Jesus doesn't marry this woman from Samaria, but the well serves as a sacred place where traditional enemies like Jesus the Jew and a Samaritan make a connection.

Perhaps Jesus *had* orchestrated this encounter from the minute he saw the strange woman at the well. The omniscient, the all-knowing Jesus idea I spoke about earlier. I find the story more powerful, however, imagining that Jesus put himself out there. He really needed a drink. When he made himself vulnerable, asked for help, the drink, it led to transformative moment between the two whose ethnicity should have compelled them to hate one another.

I am feeling my frailty more each year. I'm not old, but as I get a little older, I realize how much I depend on others. Brené Brown says that we readily call others "courageous" when they put themselves out there, express their true feelings in spite of the possibility that they might be rejected or ignored, yet, for ourselves to be vulnerable can feel like being weak. Most of us know, that with great risk can come great reward. A shared experience of trauma bringing people together. Co-workers cope with an inept supervisor. A couple faces a significant relationship breakdown - the feeling of uncertainty of looking to the future can be debilitating. But what happens if... if someone dares to speak from the heart; expressing their feelings unfiltered, in spite of the risk?

That, well, the "In-Between" place, that, I suggest transformed not just one life, but two lives – those of the woman and Jesus. It is a holy place. The place where Moses found himself with the Israelites parched, perhaps closer to dying of dehydration than we could imagine. He didn't know what to do. God said, "This is what you are going to do, Moses." Moses was not sold on that plan. It required great trust, because he had to stand before desperately thirsty followers in the wilderness, to tell them that there was indeed water.

Our need, our vulnerability, might be our spiritual superpower. Share it. Express it. Dare to believe in it. To bring this Message about the holiness of expressing vulnerability home, I'm going to draw from the gospel according to Lizzo - you know, the pop star who has no problem expressing her feelings, unfiltered, unabashed, courageously. I was moved by her acceptance speech at this year's Grammy awards where she tearfully said this:

Anybody at home who feels misunderstood or on the outside looking in like I did, just stay true to yourself, because I promise you will attract people in your life who believe in you and support you.⁴

Amen Lizzo.

³ Jacobson makes a case for the "well" in the Bible as an "in-between" place for meetings that lead to marriage. "Moses meets Zipporah; Jacob meets Rachel; Rebekah meets Abraham's servant (who is seeking a wife for Isaac)." Ibid

⁴ 65th Grammy Awards Ceremony. February 25, 2023. To find a recording of her acceptance speech, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azg3JiCs3Bg>