

March 12, 2023
Third Sunday in Lent, Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

As some of you know, I lived in Mobile, Alabama, for a few years in the 1980s. As you may have heard me summarize that experience, I grew up in Baton Rouge but lived in the Deep South only once I moved to Mobile. The Louisiana French motto “Laissez le bon temps rouler!”—“Let the good times roll!”—has no equivalent in Alabama English. As a native southerner, I didn't expect the culture to be so different. I was often surprised and sometimes shocked by things that other residents took for granted.

One surprising difference was this. You would meet a new person, and literally the very first thing out of their mouth was a question: “Where do you go to church?” Back then I didn't go to church. When I reluctantly admitted that, they would extend an invitation to visit theirs. I would like to say that this exchange always felt friendly and gracious, but it seldom did, even on the occasions when the person was being genuinely friendly and gracious. For me it always felt intrusive and judgmental, and sometimes it was. But I was probably over-sensitized by my prior experience of the type of churches they were inviting me into. As a result, these exchanges always made me uncomfortable. At the time, I wasn't yet out as gay, even to myself. But it now occurs to me that telling a stranger I didn't go to church felt a little like coming out in a situation of uncertain safety. I always felt a little sick with fear that it would turn ugly.

Admittedly, that was a long time ago; I happily left Alabama in 1989, and I never even visited again. So it's possible that my observations about life then are irrelevant now. I honestly don't know. But I do know this: since then, Alabama has become only more politically conservative. It was during my residency that the state began its run up the color scale from purplish blue to bright cherry and on something like infrared. It seems that Christian fundamentalism has fostered political fundamentalism. And that's true not just in Alabama.

New England might as well be a different world. If politics tracks religion, then it's not coincidental that New England is the least religious part of the country. We live in the land of the “noness”—that's N-O-N-E-S, people who are religiously unaffiliated. It occurs to me that I'm an “ex-none”—that is, an ex-N-O-N-E. After all, I fled the Christianity of my childhood and floated around for quite a while, but eventually I found my way back to an adjacent Christianity. This adjacency is both a comfort and a challenge. There are periods of time when I'm especially aware of that tension. This season of Lent has been one of those periods of time.

Some Christians believe that our purity, our holiness, our ability to draw near to God depends on fitting ourselves into tiny boxes of acceptability. For example, you are *male man* or *female woman*. A male man does only the things on one approved list; a female woman does only the things on another approved list; the two lists do not overlap. No matter that real life just is not that simple; no matter that it wasn't that simple even in Jesus' day.

So I've been wondering this week: if this liturgy was taking place in Tennessee, would it be classified as drag? Let's face it: good liturgy is high drama that at best demonstrates a glimmer of performance. Because women's ordination is relatively new and far from universal, these rather gaudy vestments are traditionally men's clothing. I now have a truly "men's" haircut, and this time I got it from a male barber. I usually wear a pair of men's shoes to church. Topping it all off, impressionable minors are present here today.

The law passed in Tennessee is ridiculous on its face. But it's no laughing matter. That law will hurt real human beings with real lives. The Tennessee House also passed a law this week that would allow county clerks to deny marriage licenses to same-sex, interfaith, and interracial couples. What? How'd we get back there? This is not only about drag queens, and it's not only in Tennessee. Throughout the Bible belt, trans minors are in particular danger. Maybe drag queens are simply colorful canaries in the coal mines, indicators of the toxicity to follow.

In today's gospel reading from John, we don't have a drag queen, but we do have the Samaritan woman at the well. She functions a little bit like a drag queen, the obvious extreme who illustrates the subtle mundane.

It's scandalous that Jesus is speaking with this person. The scandal starts with her gender and her ethnicity. As to gender, at that time, people of different genders simply did not mix. As to ethnicity, Samaritans considered themselves to be Israelites, but they were not part of established Temple Judaism, and they were considered less-than by the Jewish mainstream. There is likely more scandal involved, because this woman seems to be marginalized from even her peers. She's alone at that well, in the hot middle of the day. She should have been there her there with the other women, in the cooler morning or evening hours. Maybe that's due to her sketchy relationship history.

None of that matters to Jesus. He crosses over all the boundaries separating him from this woman. One might even say that he eliminates the binary boxes within which they had been trapped in their places. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul, in this case there is no male or female, there is no Jew or Samaritan, there is no presumably-celibate-man or serially-married-and-maybe-currently-adulterous-woman. I think Jesus knew that those categories ultimately serve only to separate, by raising some up some and casting some down. The solution is to eliminate them entirely. All are one in Christ.

To expand the picture a little bit, let's compare this to the story we heard last week, from the previous chapter of John's gospel, of Jesus talking to Nicodemus the Pharisee. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus is a strictly observant Jew who probably considers himself to be of superior purity. Purity was an important quality to him as it is to some now. When it comes to purity, the not-married Samaritan woman represents one extreme, while the Nicodemus the Pharisee represents the other. Jesus pretty much tosses purity out the window. Everyone and everything is unified by the living water of God's redemptive love.

As to that Samaritan woman, Jesus doesn't upbraid her for her past or tell her to do anything differently. The woman's experience of Jesus causes her to *wonder* and then to *tell* and then to *believe*. In this season of repentance, it's perhaps worth noting here that the word *repent* does not appear anywhere in John's gospel. It only shows up a handful of times in the other gospels. Even then, it might not mean quite what you expect. But that's a subject for another sermon.

The ultimate binary boxes might be God on one side and humans on the other. You might expect the boundary between them to be protected by a very thick titanium wall. Oh, but wait: God broke that boundary too, combining both humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus Christ. It seems to me that crossing boundaries to eliminate binaries is exactly what Jesus was all about. If so, then that's what we ought to be all about, too.

Today's gospel story is said to be set at Jacob's well. It's a location only mentioned here in John's Gospel, and not at all in the Hebrew scriptures. Still, it's coincidental that, in this Lent, I have been having recurring thoughts about the story from Genesis of Jacob wrestling with God. It began when I woke up one morning and thought to myself, *Rather than a God with whom I must wrestle, I want a God in whom I can rest.*

I went on to ponder my personal religious history, and my offhand conclusion was that I have spent much of my life wrestling with God. But I sat with it a little longer, and I realized that my wrestling has been less with God and more with the church. In fact, for a long time, the church offered me only a God I never *dared* or *cared* to approach, whether for wrestling or for resting. If I'm honest, I'd have to say that I'm still getting to know the God who is safe enough for both. I'm pretty sure that's the kind of God who hung out at the well with that Samaritan woman. As for church, I know the wrestling will continue, even as I'm grateful to have found a tradition that not only expects but also encourages both wrestling and resting. If you, like me, are particularly wrestling with the recent news, I hope you find rest here today.

Our final hymn today of our service today will be "There is a balm in Gilead." The first verse is this:

Sometimes I feel discouraged
And think my work's in vain
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again

When I got the bulletin from Noah, I saw that, and I kind scrunched up my eyes. It's kind of a low energy hymn, and we normally end worship on a more upbeat tone. But I trust Noah's music selection, and so I let it go. As it turns out, maybe it is the exact right hymn for us to wrap up with today. Even as we wrestle, may God give us rest.