

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**March 15, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Reading: John 4:1-29**

**Sermon: Refreshing Times (Lent 3)**

This week, I knew I had a busy week towards the end – meetings on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, cooking on Thursday. So on Monday, I got right to work on my sermon. A sermon finished on Monday is practically un-heard of in my house – I was so proud!

Then came Wednesday and the news the first Corona virus 19 case confirmed in Ottawa. I started over.

Clearly the world had changed – time to re-write that sermon. It lasted to Thursday when the school break was extended for 3 week. We were starting to take social distancing much more seriously.

At the beginning of last week, I thought the only thing I had to change was our custom of shaking hands at the door.

As first a member and now a minister, I have shaken hands at the door of the church my whole life. The church I grew up in always had greeters at the door of the sanctuary. Usually it was a family, with maybe three, four even five children, and then the parents waiting to shake your hand on the way into worship. And then on the way out the minister and his wife and kids would shake your hand again. Now I am trying to break that life-long habit. I have had to practicing NOT sticking out my hand when I greet someone. It is an impulse, a habit and a muscle memory that I am going to have to change. I do it – because I care about others and I want us to have the healthiest community possible. I am so glad my robe has pockets!

This morning in the gospel reading, we find ourselves hearing the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. They are trying to break the habits not just of a lifetime, but of generations and generations of their peoples.

In our current context you can almost imagine Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, asking her for a cup of water and her reply: “Where are you travelling from? Did you bring your own cup? When did you wash your hands last? Has anyone in your household been running a fever?”

Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman took place at the well of their shared patriarch Jacob, the place where, generations before, the covenant between God and the twelve tribes of Israel was renewed. The well marked the place where all twelve tribes could look back and find their common roots.

Of course, that unity did not last forever. After the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Israel was divided between two sons, and north and south went their own ways, until finally they became two separate religious groups, who didn't speak to one another.

They disagreed over where the most holy places were, whether the Torah was the only authoritative scripture and whether the Messianic hope from God would be fulfilled through a King or a Prophet.

When Jesus met the woman, and he asked her to pour him water, her head seems to have been full of all that divided them: Jewish and Samaritan; male and female... She challenged Jesus' expectation that they were just two unconflicted people – one thirsty, the other carrying a bucket to a well of clean water.

Jesus' response to the woman rose above all that: every person grows thirsty, whether they be Jew or Samaritan – but he knew God as unity, the source of Living Water – so that they might never thirst again. He redirected the conversation away from what separated them, and brought them back to what they had in common. The conversation meant a new start, a new relationship, a newly reconciled covenant, with neither Jew nor Samaritan at the centre, but only God.

In a very subtle way, when he mentioned her "husband", Jesus was able to show the woman that he knew her heart, he knew that her personal life was not what was usually considered respectable for either faith group. But for Jesus her marital status was not a barrier to belonging and hope where God was concerned: "the hour is coming" he said "for those who worship in Spirit and in truth."

Since the time of the prophet Hosea, marriage and broken marriage, faithfulness and infidelity have been used as a metaphor to illustrate the brokenness we create between ourselves and God. The woman started to see her own personal brokenness in the context of a much larger broken system, one that has divided the family of God and which needs to be reconciled with love, with understanding and respect.

Whereas at the beginning she mocked Jesus, now she longed for the peace and wholeness he invited her into.

This conversation by the well broke all the old rules, shocking not only the Samaritans, but Jesus' Judean disciples as well. It was clear Jesus wasn't going to play the game by the old rules – my tradition is better than your tradition, my nation over against your nation. Instead he was digging deeper into the common ground to find well-being for everyone.

Maybe the Samaritan woman at the well actually helped Jesus to break down his old prejudices too. Instead of the old us and them, God was calling Jesus to reach beyond all the racial boundaries he had grown up with, and to discover instead a new way to measure our readiness for God's mission.

Sometimes it seems it is too easy to divide ourselves into little silos. A little disagreement here, a different tradition there – we want things our way and tend to group together with people who think like we do.

And yet most of our real problems override all those differences. Like Jesus and the Samaritan woman we have much more in common than anything that divides us.

We are in the midst of a global epidemic – clearly of coronavirus – but we also seem to be experiencing an epidemic of fear and anxiety, a level of self protection and hoarding that puts others at risk. The news we hear from overseas, from south of the border, on social media and in government advisories – these are the kinds of news items that typically increase our isolation and our dis-location from different communities, not only from the people we don't know, but even from the caring relationships of neighbours, families, friends, church.

On Wednesday I sent out an email to the congregation, you may have seen it, letting everyone know the changes that we were making to keep our church practices healthy – in the midst of a pandemic. Only one thing had been cancelled!

The next day, it was like a house of cards tumbling down. 50-60 emails a day, from the congregation, from colleagues, from renters and neighbours wanting to know what we should do, what we were going to do.

I have had this conversation over and over again: “Well maybe if we serve it this way... if we cancel the refreshments, if we set the chairs up further apart... if we squirt everyone with sanitizer...” can we go ahead?

But we are at the point now where it is not about this group's practice, or that group's risk factors. Instead it is about seeing the common ground where we all stand together. It's recognizing our responsibility for one another, and putting our own habits and wishes aside in order to make things safer for others – particularly those who are most vulnerable. Learning to keep my hands in my pockets is the least of my challenges!

When the NBA suspended its season last week, and my kids were facing weeks without school, my daughter Rebekah said “It's like the whole world just hit the pause button.” Even the worst winter weather only keeps us down a day or two. This is a complete re-think for how we fill our time, how we connect with each other, how we keep in touch, how we continue fulfilling God's mission in the world, without putting anyone at risk.

I imagine we are going to rely a lot on the telephone, and the computer, on emails and facebook posts and webcasts. We may have to pray differently, we may have to read a sermon instead of coming to church to hear one, we may have to do pastoral care visits over the phone, or even write a letter!

We are going to have to learn to be creative, and forgiving and patient. Maybe we will even have to break a few habits, or reconcile a few ruptures, in order to keep accomplishing God's mission in this place and time.

Steve and I want to hear your ideas. Not that we are going to make them all happen! But we hope to work together, all of us, as we continue to be the church in a time when we are dis-located from the way we've always done things.

A colleague of mine told me about a project they had, where they cancelled church a few times a year, and said to their members: Don't go to church – Be the church. May that be our vision and our invitation for the weeks ahead, with God's help and blessing, Amen.