



July 16, 2017

We're Changed by the People We Encounter

John 4:1-15 NRSV

Pastor Lisa Kipp

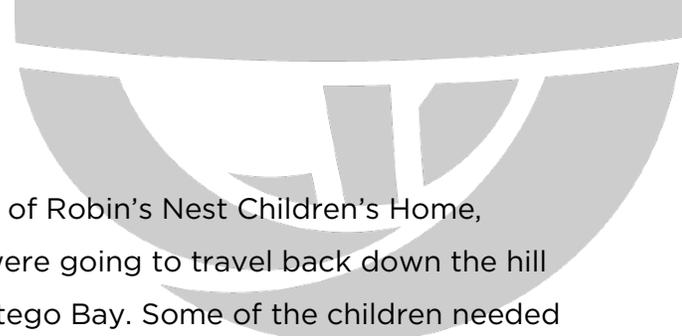
JOHN 4:1-15

NRSV

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John"—²although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Over ten years ago I went on my first trip to Jamaica, along with about twenty high school youth and adults from Zumbro. I wasn't along this past week as our mission team traveled there once again, but the reports are that they had a wonderful time. We did that first year, too. But I will admit, I was initially a little nervous about traveling to a country I'd never visited before with other people's children. It was certainly a summer road trip unlike any I had been on before. Finally, a few days into the trip I relaxed. All was going well. The greatest difficulty had been getting several hundred diapers and a few dozen jars of peanut butter through customs.



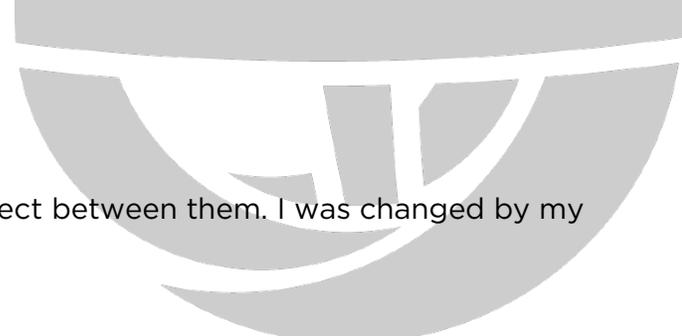
On about day three, Miss Michelle, then the director of Robin's Nest Children's Home, decided to take me with her on an adventure. We were going to travel back down the hill where the orphanage sits and into the town of Montego Bay. Some of the children needed to be picked up from swimming lessons. "I want you to meet somebody first," she told me. I enthusiastically agreed. I'm almost always up for an adventure, and it was a good time in the week for me to take a short break from the group I was leading. Miss Michelle looked at me with a smile and a twinkle in her eye. That should have been my clue that I was in for a memorable experience.

Soon we were jostling and rocking our way down the hill. After about fifteen minutes we'd traveled about half a mile and through no fewer than fifty potholes. As we wound around a tight corner I held my breath. With a jerking push of the brakes, Miss Michelle announced that we had arrived. "I want you to meet LeRoy," she told me. "He's the leader of the Jamaican mafia." And at that she grabbed a bag of stuffed animals, opened her door, looked at me and said, "Well, come on. What are you waiting for?"

I got out of the van with my eyes wide open. After some silent prayer and a few minutes of small talk, I did what any respectable youth leader would do. I had my picture taken with LeRoy. While we visited, Miss Michelle handed the bag of stuffed animals to him. They were for his kids. I watched as a handful of children ran around playing behind us. And then LeRoy looked at me and began to talk. "Ain't nobody gonna mess with the kids up there at the Nest. They know I'm protectin' them. I look out for them kids, and Miss Michelle, she takes good care of me and my family." I smiled, and watched as Michelle gave LeRoy a hug good-bye, and then we were on our way.

I'll never forget that moment when Miss Michelle announced that we were stopping by the home of the leader of the Jamaican mafia. I admit, I didn't really know much of anything about the mafia in Jamaica. It hadn't been covered in the travel books I read. But my imagination was filled with plenty of ideas, and none of them were good. Yet the encounter I witnessed between Miss Michelle and LeRoy was nothing short of beautiful. They both knew who the other was, and yet somehow they had a special compassion for one another.



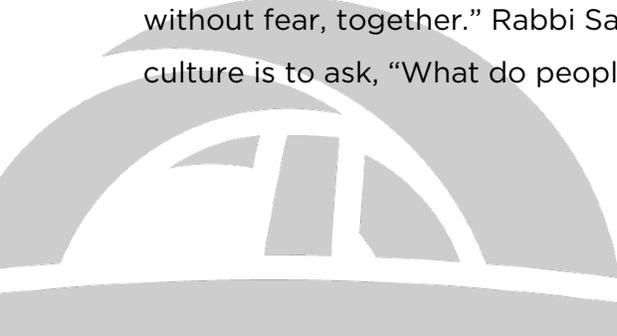


Despite all of their differences, there was deep respect between them. I was changed by my encounter with LeRoy.

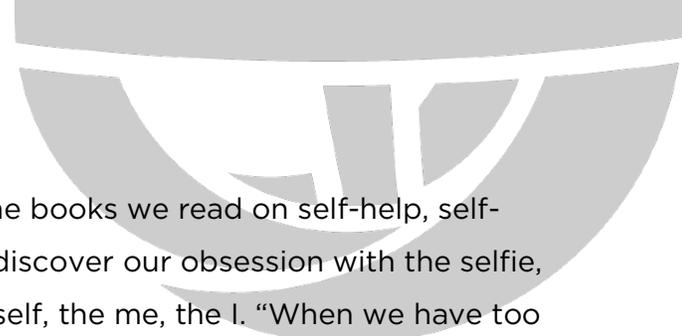
Jesus was on a road trip from Judea to Galilee. And instead of avoiding Samaria like many religious leaders would have done, he went straight through. I suspect that any onlookers to Jesus asking the Samaritan woman for a drink of water might have been as surprised as I was watching Miss Michelle hand over a bag of stuffed animals to LeRoy. First of all, Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. And secondly, women and men kept a much safer social distance from one another than this encounter suggests. But as we see time and again in Jesus' ministry, Jesus goes out of his way to encounter an outsider. And as he does, lives are changed and the kingdom of God gets a little bit bigger.

But there's always been something about our interpretation of this Bible story that has bothered me. If we read on a few more verses in John 4, we discover that this woman has had five husbands. It's easy to form quick judgments. One famous preacher once described the Samaritan woman as "a worldly, sensually-minded, unspiritual harlot from Samaria," and then later on he described her as a "whore." But here's the thing. We don't know that this is the case at all. She could have been widowed, or divorced, or abandoned. Though five times might seem unlikely, it was absolutely possible. In fact, there are a variety of ways in which this woman's background might just be more tragic than scandalous.

During Jesus' encounter with the woman, they both offer the other what each of them needs. Jesus was probably tired from walking long days in the sun. He came to the well for water, but had no way to drink it. But the woman did. Likewise, she came to the well and was noticed and seen by one she quickly described as a prophet. And Jesus had to offer what it was that she needed - transforming, living water. But if both of them would have allowed their differences to take precedence, the life-changing encounter might never have happened.



Rabbi Jonathan Sacks delivered a TED Talk recently called, "How we can face the future without fear, together." Rabbi Sacks says that one of the most simple ways to look into a culture is to ask, "What do people worship?" He believes that generations from now when



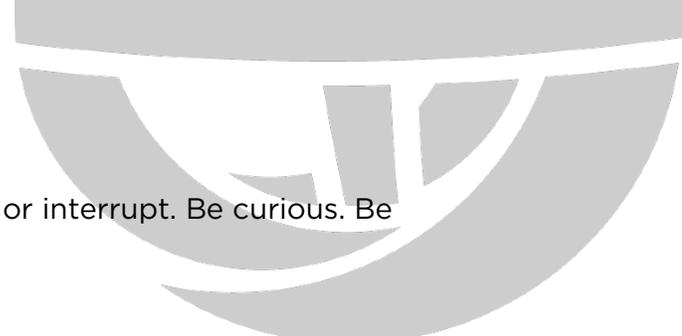
anthropologists look back at our era and observe the books we read on self-help, self-realization, and self-esteem, and when researchers discover our obsession with the selfie, they will conclude that in our time, we worship the self, the me, the I. “When we have too much of the I and too little of the we,” the rabbi says, “we can find ourselves vulnerable, fearful, and alone.”

So how does Rabbi Sacks believe we move beyond the self, the me, the I? “We need to renew [our] face to face encounters with those people who are not like us. Because it’s in those face to face encounters,” he believes, “that we discover that the people not like us, are just people like us.”

Author Elizabeth Lesser is leading an initiative that she calls “Take ‘the Other’ to Lunch.” She’s deeply disturbed by the ways we demonize those who are not like us in our culture. And so she kicked off her initiative by following her own advice. Elizabeth is an activist from the political left, and so she invited a more conservative woman from the local tea party to lunch. Elizabeth’s lunch partner and her came away with some helpful insights. Near the end of the conversation, Elizabeth asked, “Why does your side make such outrageous allegations about my side? Like we’re a bunch of elitist, corrupt, terrorism lovers?” In her response, her new friend shared, “Why do you call us blameless, gun-toting racists?” Elizabeth and her lunch partner both marveled at how neither of them knew anyone from their side that fit those labels. Because they had developed some trust during their encounter, they believed one another, and agreed that they would each stick up in their own communities when they witnessed that kind of extreme “otherising” talk that simply wasn’t true.

So might you be brave enough to accept Elizabeth’s challenge and “Take ‘the Other’ to Lunch?” Are you willing to get to know one person from a group that you may have negatively stereotyped? Maybe it’s someone younger or older, someone with deeply held different political views than you, someone who is gay or transgender, someone who is an evangelical Christian, or someone who is Muslim? Before you get together, Elizabeth suggests that you agree on some ground rules. The agreed upon guidelines at her lunch





were fairly straightforward: Don't persuade, defend or interrupt. Be curious. Be conversational. Be real, and listen.

Here's the thing. This isn't easy work. If just the thought of doing something like this gives you butterflies in your stomach, then you are normal. But like many things in life, I think the risk is worth it. You see, there's something beautiful that happens when we encounter the other. Our beliefs are challenged. We learn. We grow. We're stretched. And we just might build a bridge of understanding and peace.

When Miss Michelle threw me out of the van to meet the leader of the Jamaican mafia, I had all sorts of quick judgments. But what I discovered was that God could use a broken man (who had probably made mistakes in his life that I didn't want to know about), to protect and care for some of the most wounded children in Jamaica. The encounter changed my perspective about who could join in God's mission. When Jesus and the Samaritan woman encountered one another at the well, they discovered that despite all of their differences, they had something that the other needed. When Elizabeth took someone from the other side of the political aisle out for lunch, they both learned that their assumptions about the other were extreme and inaccurate.

Friends, it's fairly easy to associate with the people who agree with you or look like you or believe the same things that you do. But whether you're on a road trip, or at a family reunion, or in the middle of the grocery store, people who are different than you surround you. And these are the people that God created and that God loves. My challenge to you is to reach out to someone on your journey that is different than you. You might be surprised. The person who might be changed the most by the encounter just might be you. And when that happens, the kingdom of God gets a little bit bigger. Amen.

