

THIRST FIRST

Texts on Sunday, March 19, 2017

Exodus 17:1-7; John 4: 5-29

Have you ever known a person to change—even yourself perhaps? For now, I don't mean unintentional change, change for the worse, such as when a person starts drinking or stops smiling after losing her job or his marriage, and you hear people say, "Boy, she really changed." That is not the question this morning. Rather, have you seen anyone make a great change of lasting value? It is a rare thing, so rare that people often say, "No one ever changes."

That phrase was purged from my vocabulary through the course of ten years during which I visited men in Attica prison every other week. What I took part in was a conversation—it is still going on twice a week in that prison and a few others in the western part of New York State—among usually ten or twelve men inside and three or four volunteers. The rules for the conversation were two: 1. Everything said is held in confidence. 2. Everything said must come from personal experience—no abstract arguments, no religious or political doctrine, no reading aloud from any book at all; our own experiences, good or bad, were the only acceptable sources for conversation. Its whole purpose was to provide a field where individuals could grapple with how they might change in a direction they deeply desired. Volunteers were in for change like that on the same basis as the men inside. Why? Because we are all in prisons. We all need freedom.

Many men I met inside were more free than citizens outside who do not see the iron bars they live within. On those visits at Attica, I bore witness to more focused desire to grow than I have ever seen outside—not in churches, or seminars, or therapy groups. Now, someone might think, *Well of course! Men in prison need to change, but we don't, so big deal.* And there is a crumb of truth in that, for if a person does not feel she needs to change, she most certainly will not—at least not for the better. If being a so-called free adult means you are left to be however you like, then it follows that transformative change will never take place—unless there comes a severe challenge, something like a prison, and you face the bars. Becoming aware of a desire to change, of a thirst for what is higher, is our concern today. Thirst first.

What can bring an ordinary adult, perhaps even a church-going adult, to feel his prison, and focus on his desire to grow and be free? This is the most basic question a human faces across the years, *How to become more free?* It is the heart of the God question. It is the only question people bring to Jesus in all the stories. It is the question in psycho-therapy. It is the prisoner's

question. Yet most people fail to ask the question of freedom at the needed time. This is why there is so much addiction, so much despair, so much death by overdose and gunshot, so much bitterness and cruelty and fear, so much denial. People do not get things 'round right. They do not thirst first.

We heard two Bible stories anchored in thirst, one from the Exodus wilderness wandering, the other from a dusty road in Samaria. These are offered for contemplation on the second Sunday in Lent, because in Lent, Christians have the habit of trying to stay alert to the suffering of Jesus, his hunger, his weakness, his thirst, on the way to the Cross.

Let us not worry whether the stories really happened. Maybe they didn't; it does not matter. What matters is that in telling these stories through thousands of years, souls who thirst have been drawn to the waters of life. Can you feel today your thirst to become more free? That is all that matters.

In the desert called Sin, the tradition tells that a bunch of slaves on the run from their Egyptian masters now needed water. They cried out to Moses. *Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?*

With this story, Israel of old gave to all generations a magnifying lens to examine themselves, to search after their own desire for freedom. For here, although the slaves are free from their former masters, and even though all of them, according to the story—never mind if it happened—have experienced the miracle of being saved from Pharaoh's army, now, in the next instant, they no longer feel free. They are thirsty, but they do not thirst in the spiritual sense. They are not empty; they are full of anger and fear. They want to go back to Egypt. They sound like people at a political rally. "Let's take the country back," a misleader shouts. *How far back?* the wise want to know. All the way to Egypt? With this story, Israel asks itself the basic God question: How is it that we who have been freed still yearn to return to bondage?

In the story of Jesus traveling through Samaria, it says Jesus was thirsty. You could skip this detail; you could think, *He's a man, of course he's thirsty.* But the evangelist has something bigger in mind. It is in his gospel that Jesus on the cross will say, "I thirst." Jesus knows thirst first. He prepares for total transformation of lasting, everlasting value. Here in Samaria he uses his thirst to help a woman of Samaria break free from thirst for ordinary satisfactions to thirst for life which no earthen jug can hold.

These stories affirm that God Holy Spirit can move and transform a person and even a whole people. But the stories carry also a message, even a warning. It is this. God comes—God only comes—to those who thirst, to

those who wait in their thirst for a word. For those who are satisfied—with themselves, with their lives, with their nation; for those who get what they want when they want—God has nothing, God gives nothing, God is nothing. God comes to the empty, only to the empty. Thirst first.

In Exodus, the transformation of the people will come only after they suffer much more deeply their confusion and hunger, and learn to wait upon the Lord upon that mountain for forty days. At the well of Jacob, the transformation for the Samaritan woman will come only after she knows that her whole life of confusion and abuse and appetite has been seen but not condemned by the man of living water. Then her heavenly thirst flies free.

There is a reason that change of great value comes only to those who thirst and wait, and never to those who take whatever they find whenever they want. There is a reason that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, as Thoreau put it, and another mass of men and women are addicted to drugs or alcohol or kill themselves with guns or work. It is not hard to say why humans despair and nothing changes, and no God comes. It comes to this.

Like all the other animals, the human needs to be happy. From birth, we crave security, affection, and some control over things. Some of our needs go unmet, some get crushed. We come into young adulthood bound and determined to guard our security, get our affection, and exercise our control over life. Our happiness hangs on our getting our way. This—getting our way—our culture calls freedom. But whoever is bound and determined is not free. That's bondage.

Then something blocks us from our way. A car accident. A war wound. A job lost. A racist supervisor. A terrible disease. A crumbling marriage. You name it. Something we thought absolutely necessary to our happiness crashed or burned. Some affection, some secure place, some of our control over the future collapsed and with it our happiness, our hope, our freedom. This is an ancient story of bondage. It is also your story.

Now comes the God question, the only question ever put to Jesus in all the Bible stories: *How to become free when my happiness is lost?* There cannot be a more urgent, more difficult question in all existence, because if you do not ask the question at the needed time, then you will take whatever steps you can to get back to happiness as you once knew it. Everything you take will be a mis-take, and nothing new will come.

But if you wonder whether happiness is possible *without* the thing you thought necessary—the person, the status, the stuff—if you wonder through a dark night how you can become free without the good things or the goals

you knew; if you hold vigil in that prayer, if you thirst first, and take nothing, and mis-take nothing, then, and only then, God comes. When a person is torn from his old life, whatever its values and its foundations were, it is possible—God knows, it does not always happen—that if he does not head back to Egypt, does not try to make America great again, does not insist on his own way, it is possible for him to receive life anew, life not like any he could imagine. Because God comes to nothing. This is the whole purpose of the Cross for you.

For a few years, I taught at Sing-Sing Prison through New York Theological Seminary. I sometimes put a question to the men. *Is it possible, I would ask, to be happy, to be at peace, when absolutely everything around you has crashed and fallen apart?* How sublime was the energy in the room each time that question was before them. First, a silence, their faces suggesting they were letting in memories of their long sorrows, those they'd done to others, those that had been done to them and them they loved. Then, a clearing in the eyes, as they recalled how they had thirsted for real freedom from their bondage. Then a joyful claim, almost a shout, *Yes! Absolutely!*

For this, you must first thirst. For freedom Christ has set you free. For this, was prayer and fasting made, for this, meditation and rest from your labors, for this, the hour of worship: that you learn in your distress to wait upon the Lord for the gift you cannot imagine. For God comes to those who thirst first.

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