



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH
on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Third Sunday in Lent
March 19, 2017
The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

Carrie Newcomer is my favorite singer, a folk-singer from Indiana whom I have appreciated for at least 30 years. She is a Quaker, social justice and peace advocate, and a mean guitar player. She has been called a “prairie mystic” and her poems are wonderful even when not set to music. This is called *A Permeable Life*.



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I want to leave enough room in my heart
For the unexpected,
For the mistake that becomes knowing,
For knowing that becomes wonder
For wonder that makes everything porous,
Allowing in and out
All available light.

An impermeable life is full to the edges,
But only to the edges.
It is a limited thing.
Like the pause at the center of the breath,
Neither releasing or inviting,
With no hollow spaces
For longing and possibility,

I would rather live unlocked,
And more often than not astonished,
Which is possible
If I am willing to surrender
What I already think I know.
So I will stay open
And companionably friendly,
With all that presses out from the heart
And comes in at a slant
And shimmers just below
The surface of things.

I personally would like to put Carrie Newcomer in charge of the world.



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So what does having a permeable life have to do with the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well? First, I believe that being permeable is the only way to break down barriers. If we are convinced that the way we understand things is the only way to understand them, then we are not prepared to let in new information or new ways of knowing. This encounter at the well could not have happened if Jesus were not prepared to transcend all of the ways that he, a Jewish man, was supposed to think about this woman and to be permeable to the moment. She was part of a detested culture. To the Jewish way of thinking, the Samaritans worshipped in the wrong place and in the wrong way, which meant that they were rejecting the instructions of God. That made them suspect, perhaps dangerous and unclean. She was a woman, unaccompanied and it was inappropriate for them to speak. She also had a complicated story which apparently Jesus knew intuitively. To ask her for water was shocking; to take water from her unclean hands was culturally problematic. They should have both been suspicious of each other and kept their distance, safe in ignoring the other. But they didn't. Instead they engaged in the most permeable activity – they had a conversation – the longest conversation that Jesus has with anyone in all of the Gospels. And it wasn't a conversation about the weather or the history of the well. It was about deep longing and profound, theological truths about what we all need and seek – that which refreshes and waters our souls. In Carrie's words, they allowed in "all of the available light" and stayed "companionably friendly with all that presses out from the heart and comes in at a slant." I think that that is the best description for how God works in our lives.

The scene here is set by their mutual vulnerability. Jesus is tired and thirsty and needs water. The need for water is not just a plot device for people who live in an arid climate. It is critical for survival. The woman, I do wish she had a name, is vulnerable all of the time, but particularly when out in the world unaccompanied. It was a cultural assumption that an unaccompanied woman was fair game. And there they found themselves vulnerable at the well.

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In this conversation, Jesus reveals to the woman what is available to her, not just light, but water and life-giving acceptance. That's always how God starts with us – telling us what is available, love, forgiveness, joy, wonder, true knowledge of who we are – God's very own beloved. But this is never forced on us. We have to ask for it and say, "yes, please. I accept what you offer me." That's what the woman's questions did. They continued to make her permeable to God's offer through her encounter with Jesus. Her questions kept carving out space within her being to become something new. Along with being Jesus' longest conversation partner, she is also the first one to whom he reveals himself as the Messiah in the Gospel of John. He doesn't do so with religious leaders or even his disciples, but rather to an outsider and a very surprising one at that.

After this conversation, the woman leaves, partly because the disciples come back and immediately break the spell. They bring with them all of the old prejudices, "Why are you talking with her, this woman?" They are reminders of how easy it is to be impermeable, to be blind to something new happening right in front of you. You can almost hear the sneer as they dismiss her. And yet, when she leaves, she leaves behind her water jug as if to say, "I have a new source of water now, but you guys apparently need this!" She also leaves as a disciple herself. There are two clues that warrant recognizing her as a disciple. She reflects two disciple stories; first when Andrew tells his brother Peter, "Come, we have found the Messiah" and Peter comes along with others. Secondly, like Nathaniel, who begins to believe in Jesus because Jesus tells him things about himself that Jesus couldn't have known by ordinary means. This woman goes back to her community and tells them, "Come and see, this man...Can this be the Christ?! And he told me everything I've ever done."

Apparently, the Samaritans were permeable people, prepared to let in the suddenly available light and change what they thought they knew. They had enough space within to be curious and venture out to see something novel, to learn something new about themselves and about God.

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There is so much of God shimmering just below the surface of our days and lives. All that is asked of us is that we be curious and open to it.

Please take this poem with you this week, read it a few times, ask some questions, make some room available for the unexpected, and maybe even astonished by living water and all available light.

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