

“Drawing from a Deeper Well”

March 12, 2023

Scripture: John 4:5-42

I recently came across a paper by a group of scientists at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California. It's titled, “Avoiding the ‘Great Filter’: Extraterrestrial Life and Humanity’s Future in the Universe.” The paper addresses what is known as the Fermi Paradox. Back in 1950 the physicist Enrico Fermi, who was part of the Manhattan Project that developed our country’s first atomic bomb, was talking with some colleagues over lunch about the likelihood of extraterrestrial life, given the vast number of stars and galaxies and presumably planets in the universe. Fermi reportedly asked the obvious, “So, where is everybody?” The Great Filter is a theory that says as different civilizations advance they ultimately meet some cataclysmic event that wipes them out before they can encounter one another. The paper enumerates five such events that could have that effect on humanity: nuclear war, pathogens and pandemics, artificial intelligence, asteroid and comet impacts, and climate change.

The real significance of their insights, I think, comes in their conclusions. For the authors, the threat to our survival as a species lies in our immaturity. As they put it, “History has shown that intraspecies competition and more importantly, collaboration, has led us toward the highest peaks of invention. And yet, we prolong notions that seem to be the antithesis of long-term sustainable growth. Racism, genocide, inequity, sabotage...the list sprawls. Some of these have the human condition to blame as causation – perhaps the subliminal urge of conquest, of imperialism, of victory over an ‘evil enemy’ at all costs. It’s clear generations of world leaders have fallen prey to these desires.” In other words, we just can’t stop killing each other. And every day we make up new reasons to do it. We are our own greatest threat.

You may wonder what any of that has to do with the story I just read. But that story, one of my favorites in the gospels, is shot through with all our greatest weaknesses and reveals what I believe is the only path to our survival.

Jesus and his disciples enter a region in Judea known as Samaria. It’s not a large region, it lies somewhere between Galilee in the north and Judea proper, which includes Jerusalem, to the south. It’s in the shadow of Mt. Gerazim, which is the mountain referred to by the woman, the place where a temple once stood where the Samaritan people worshiped. There was an ancient feud between Jews and Samaritans. It’s believed the Samaritans were the remnant Israelites left in the region after the northern kingdom was overrun by the Assyrian empire around 721 BCE. They followed the Torah, like Jews to the south, but they didn’t recognize the authority of the prophets. So their observances may have been a bit different but mostly the same. The feud lay in accusations of collaboration with various other foreign occupiers which led, after the Maccabean revolt against the Greeks about 200 years before Jesus’ time, to the new rulers destroying the Samaritan temple.

Now, 200 years might sound like a long time to carry a grudge, but for most societies it’s the blink of an eye. In fact, there is a piece of interpretation of oral law known as Mishnah that comes from the teacher Shammai, a contemporary of Jesus, that declares Samaritan women

impure from birth. It's not known why he did this, but clearly he didn't want Jewish men to have relationships with Samaritan women. So, that is an undercurrent in this story. This sort of ethnic and gender friction overshadows this whole conversation. It's why when the disciples return they are, and this is the first time I've ever used this word, they are nonplussed. They are so utterly shocked to find Jesus talking to a woman, and a Samaritan woman to boot, that they have no words.

It's hard to blame them, really, considering the nature of the conversation. In a patriarchal society any woman's status is lower than a man's. And as we learn a little later in their encounter, there may have been a reason why this woman was going to the well in the hottest part of the day on her own. It may be that her status was especially low because of her background. So, when Jesus approaches her, she has good reason to feel threatened and suspicious. Yet, she holds her own. She questions him; something I suspect was unusual in that world. But Jesus doesn't seem to be bothered by it. Instead he invites her on a little journey, an intellectual excursion to plumb the depths of her understanding. And he's not disappointed. She is a brilliant theologian, this random woman at the well. At first she thinks he's being literal, but it's not long before she gets it. And he stays with her.

Just a chapter before in John's gospel, Jesus is approached by a leader named Nicodemus. And when he seems to fall into misunderstanding he sort of fades from the scene altogether. But not this woman. She stays with him, responding to his questions, challenging his worldview. I think Jesus is delighted to meet someone who really understands what he's all about. The only other person to get him so completely is his mother who knows what he can do to save the wedding party at Cana by turning water into wine. So far in John's gospel we've met two women and both of them understand who Jesus is better than any of the men who've met him. Make of that what you will.

The point is the disciples walk in on a theological discussion between Jesus and this "lowly" woman and they are gob-smacked. What they're witnessing is Jesus crossing all sorts of boundaries—ethnic, gender, social, religious—boundaries they have been taught all their lives are inviolable. Boundaries their world has told them are necessary to protect their way of life, to maintain order, to keep the wrong kind of people in their place. But Jesus is drawing from a deeper well.

Jesus reveals to this woman and to his disciples the true meaning of his message, of the signs he performs, of the ministry that drives him. It is to dive deep into the presence of the Divine and discover the connection that binds us all. It's to shed all the superficial categories we use to keep ourselves divided from one another. It's to refuse to be subjected to some arbitrary hierarchy based on ethnic heritage or gender or religion or morality to determine our relationships. He offers us a way out of our prison; the prison we've constructed for ourselves out of hatred and fear.

All it takes is a willingness to see the other, to know them, to listen with compassion and not judgment. How liberating it must have been for this woman, who probably made her way to that well every day alone out of shame, to be regarded with dignity, to be seen fully but not

judged, only loved. No wonder she ran back to her city to tell everyone what had happened to her. She was saved.

Think of all the ways we categorize other people, all the walls we build to keep ourselves from seeing others fully. We're hearing so much hateful rhetoric from politicians and provocateurs. How do we counter calls to "eradicate transgenderism," which can only mean eliminating people who are transgender? How do we stand up against forces of Christian nationalism and white supremacy? How do we rid ourselves of patriarchy and toxic masculinity? We do these things by following Jesus and drawing from a deeper well. We allow his example to shape us, to mold us in his image and see others fully, listen to others with compassion and not judgment. We cross the boundaries he's willing to cross, let go of everything we've been taught and learn a new way to be human. In this powerful encounter at the well, Jesus unveils the key to our survival; and it may be our only hope.

At the end of their paper the JPL scientists offer two options on the question of extraterrestrial life. If such life exists, which statistically is likely, they ask if we are ready as a species to receive that news; are we really equipped to compete with it if it comes to that? But the other option is even more compelling. Suppose there is no one else out there. Suppose we are the only intelligent life in the universe. If that's the case, then, they write, "Our lives are *not* expendable. We have been treating casualties as casual, nukes as necessary, and large-scale death as inevitable. Life – human life, the lives of our delicate biomes and the millions of species which inhabit it – is unique and so incalculably precious." Jesus reveals a way to save us, if we'll take it. It's time we started drawing from a deeper well, before it's too late.

Amen