

## **“The End of Exile”**

Rev. David Gregory

June 24, 2018

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost



*The Woman of Samaria at the Well*  
James Tissot

### **Scripture reading**

*John 4:1-14 (from The Message by Eugene Peterson)*

*Jesus left the Judean countryside and went back to Galilee. To get there, he had to pass through Samaria. He came into a Samaritan village that bordered the field Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob’s well was still there. Jesus, worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon.*

*A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, “Would you give me a drink of water?” (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.) The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, “How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (Jews in those days wouldn’t be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)*

*Jesus answered, “If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water.” The woman said, “Sir you don’t even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this ‘living water’? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?”*

*Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”*

## **Second reading**

*Open and Affirming Policy statement, CCC Bylaws*

*In the living out of our Covenant we are called as a spiritual community to actively accept and welcome each and every one of God's people regardless of differences that may distract or divide us. Therefore, we declare ourselves to be an Open and Affirming church. We specifically extend our welcome with open hearts and doors to those in the LGBTQ+ community because we recognize the fear, discrimination and injustice they face within society and within the church, which has frequently exiled them from its spiritual community. By so doing we also affirm the personhood of all people within the fellowship and membership of the Community Congregational Church.*

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You may have noticed that at the beginning of each Sunday Celebration, I identify Community Congregational Church as an Open and Affirming Congregation of the United Church of Christ, and highlight the fact that no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. You may or may not know what this designation of "Open and Affirming" means, or why it is so important to me and to many, many others, both inside and outside this spiritual community, so I'm going to tell you about it – not just so that you can understand it intellectually, but as with everything we do here, we want you to leave here with some sort of indelible experience of the heart.

There is no way to tell the story of Jesus without talking about marginalized people. The gospel stories overflow with episodes showing Jesus of Nazareth reaching out to everyone on the edges of society, pushed there by people who at times mean well, but who think it is their job to be the protectors of something that does not need protecting. Perhaps they are fearful of something or someone who is different, or concerned about being infected with disease, or perhaps worried about losing their own righteous reputation, or putting their own livelihood at risk. How many stories do we read about people with a shady past, lepers, epileptics, extortioners, sex workers, foreigners, widows, orphans, the poor, the sick, the homeless, or women in general? Or fishermen just hoping to catch enough to survive, Galilean carpenters just trying to make ends meet? We could list them all day, and we could read the stories for weeks at a time and never get to all of them.

All of these stories are against the backdrop of the brutal force of the Roman Empire, and a religious establishment known for its own brutality in picking up stones to hurl at someone who met their disapproval or for colluding with the Empire itself in an attempt to control the lives of others, many of whom were unable to ask any of the more luxurious religious questions, because it was all they could do to simply survive. Two thousand years later, in spite of the forward movement of evolving people and cultures, where marginalized people are concerned, things are just not that different. They are very different for me, however, because my experience has involved both life in the center of things, and life on the margins.

My formative years were spent in a place of cultural privilege. An Anglo-Saxon Protestant, I was the youngest of three children, and the only son of my parents. To this day, my sisters think I had it easier than they did. The truth is, some things were just easier because I was a boy—my father was, shall we say, old school when it came to the place of men in the family. As a young adult, I graduated from my dad's "old school." I got married, became a minister, and went on to have a family of my own—two sons, the only ones to carry on the family name. One of them is the spitting image of my dad. I made my father proud, and doing so meant I was living a lie, a lie that I was naive to think could ever be sustained. So, in a rather short period of time, during my 40th year of life, I moved from the very center of cultural privilege, as an Anglo, Protestant, minister, husband, and father, to a gay, middle-aged carpet salesman struggling to feed myself and pay child support. It was a stunning fall from grace. Ask anyone who knew me then.

*David has taken leave of his senses. How could he create such a scandal for his wife and children, his church, his community, his dying parents? Why couldn't he just hold it together for the sake of his children? And then all the walls got built. My closest friends would no longer speak to me unless I repented. I was a sinner, and apostate, a false prophet, a wolf in sheep's clothing, tainted by spiritual and moral failure. Is it any wonder that my church for the next three years was the Monroe Avenue Pub in Rochester, New York—a place where I could commiserate with people like me?*

It was outside that pub on a hot summer night when I was heading for my car that three young men from a bar around the corner came bounding toward my car. Two friends and I jumped in quickly as I put the car in gear and drove off as the young men tried and failed to kick in my car windows—yelling the usual insults, calling us the usual names. I know how the margins feel. And this is why this Open and Affirming statement from our church's bylaws is so important to me.

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I am an exile who returned, thanks to my friends in the Presbyterian Church USA and in the United Church of Christ, who tended my wounds and returned to me my sense of human dignity by valuing my gifts and celebrating my honesty. I'm back, along with many of my sisters and brothers who have also been exiled: ministers and lay people, religious and non-religious, pushed to the margins of acceptable culture, and now fully accepted in some communities of faith and, at least for the time being, able to enjoy equal marriage rights in all fifty states. Thank you very much.

But on this Pride Sunday 2018, I call your attention to the fact that we have not arrived. One of the most important pieces of this Open and Affirming statement is the little plus sign right after “LGBTQ.” There are many, many other marginalized people who need the same openness and affirmation that we have fought for and in some cases won.

Jesus healed those with leprosy, but he didn’t stop there. He interrupted the stoning of a sex worker, but he didn’t stop there. He had dinner with criminals, but he didn’t stop there. He spoke to women as though they were human beings instead of someone’s property, but he didn’t stop there. To the moment of his death he never stopped, and neither should we.

Whenever societies start to tear down walls in favor of building bridges, the wall-builders start working overtime. While we sit on the top of this rock this morning, walls are being built, tents are going up, cages are being constructed. The rights of all kinds of exiles are being challenged and denied, as the power of Empire grows to keep them walled within whatever enclosure can be constructed the quickest. We understand that it is our task to break down walls and to build bridges all across this human family, but to do so we have to understand what’s happening on the other side of that wall, with those human sisters and brothers who because of fears, and because of those who play on that fear, think they must build the walls higher, and as they frantically go about the task, might just be asking. . . *Why do we build the wall, my children, my children, Why do we build the wall?*

[Here Scott and Tripp became part of the message as they joined David in song.]

Amen!