

## Seeing The Whole Person

Not long ago, I was walking through downtown Toronto when I stopped into a Mcdonalds to grab a coffee. Before making my way to the counter, I decided to go to the washroom to wash my hands. When I walked up to the sink, standing at the sink beside me was a man who was obviously using the facilities to take care of his daily hygiene. He had a backpack at his feet, opened up with his personal belongings strewn about. I knew from my past experiences of working with people on the street in downtown Toronto, this was someone who called the streets his home. The man had just finished shaving, he looked over at me, with his cleanly shaven, reddened face, water dripping from his eyebrows, nose and chin and said to me, "wow, my face is just burning right now!" he continued by saying, "you know how it feels, like when you've been maced?"

Well, you know, I paused when he asked that question. I thought to myself, do I look like I should know what it's like to be maced? I really couldn't recall a time when I had been maced. Although, from the time I had spent working in street ministry in downtown Toronto, people had told me of such experiences and I had been near situations and involved in the aftermath when someone had been maced. And besides, I know how uncomfortable it can be to shave when one's face is cold and wind burned, so I felt as if I was able to acknowledge to a certain degree what this guy was experiencing. So I responded with a degree of empathy to what he was feeling at that moment. Yet, as I left the washroom, I wasn't just thinking about getting a coffee any more, I found myself pondering what that fellow was going through, what the night was like before, relying on a Mcdonalds restaurant as a place to wash up. I also found myself reflecting on my own life and that no, I didn't know what it was like to be maced, I even wondered if I did know, would be a different person?

That little, unplanned encounter gave me a lot to think about as I went on my way. Such encounters in life, can certainly help to put things into perspective. We manage to see more of ourselves and others than we might have otherwise imagined. Encounters we have, experiences we share with others that can cast us, others, even the world in a different light.

I believe that this is something that we can take away from our scripture this morning that Flo read for us. It is a rather long text compared to many texts that we consider. Yet we

need to hear the whole story. This story is meant to be read as a whole. It is as a story that has much to teach us as a people of faith about how encounters, with others, encounters with Christ can give us a different perspective concerning ourselves, others and God.

It was this different perspective that Jesus gave to his disciples, it was this different perspective that he gave to the Samaritan woman as he encountered her at the well that day. We get a hint of this in the verse just preceding the text where it says that Jesus stopped at the well at noon. It was mid-day, the brightest part of the day, the time of day when shadows are minimal, and visibility is highest. You see, in John's Gospel, just as darkness symbolizes disbelief, so also does daylight signify faith and what we come to see in the light of faith.

This story is early on in John's gospel, a time when the disciples were just getting to know Jesus as "the light of the world." When it came to Jesus, they had as of yet to see the whole person, their relationship with him was fairly new. They had much to learn when it came to understanding what kind of Messiah he was. How is it that he gives light to this life and this world?

So they get to a point along the road, when they are in the foreign land of Samaria when Jesus decides he needs a rest. The disciples go on ahead into the village to buy food and Jesus stays behind at the well where a Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water. And as the writer of John's gospel wants to make clear, notes that "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." In other words, they don't get along, they are strangers, perhaps even enemies. These are people who keep their distance. They had done it for years...they had done it since birth.

To make it even more clear that Jesus and the Samaritan woman should have nothing to do with each other, when the disciples return, they are "astonished that (Jesus) was speaking with a woman." All of which explains why the woman is so surprised when Jesus asks her for a drink. Could he not see that she was a Samaritan? Could he not see that she was a woman and he a Jewish man?

When she makes a remark to this effect, Jesus then offers the woman what he refers to as "living water." Confused, but intrigued, she asks about this miraculous water. Jesus answers by asking her to call her husband. When she replies that she has no husband, he

agrees. He says, "You have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband!" We do not know if this woman could have been widowed, abandoned or divorced. But we do know that such a situation would have been heartbreaking for this woman. There was a great deal of brokenness in this woman's life.

To say that she was currently living with someone who was not her husband, could refer to a particular arrangement that would often take place in those days, where a woman's deceased husband's brother would enter into a relationship with her to produce an heir. It was so a woman might have a child or children who could eventually care for her and offer protection as she grew old. This Samaritan woman's situation in life could very well have been an extremely tragic one. And she herself, utterly forgettable, insignificant, an afterthought.

I mean, she does come to the well alone that day. This is odd. In those days, women of the village would usually go to the well together to draw water. They would have relied on one another for company and security. By coming alone, the text tells us that this woman didn't really want to be seen.

Yet the story also reveals that Jesus, could see her. He could see the whole person. He knew her history, that she was a Samaritan. He had every reason to see the bits and pieces that could divide them culturally, socially, economically, even personally and have nothing to do with her. Yet instead, there he is with her having a conversation...paying attention to her...seeing her value and significance. Much to the astonishment of his disciples...and to the woman. When she comprehends that Jesus sees her and knows her fully she says of him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet." Which drives her to ask the central question regarding the proper place of worship that had divided Samaritans and Jews for centuries. She is still concerned with the things that separate them. That which divided where they lived, the life they were born into, even their water supply. The things that she also believed separated her from Jesus. And when Jesus supplies an answer that they day will come when all will worship God in Spirit and in Truth, when the things that separate will separate no more. She is no longer thinking about going to the well to draw water...she leaves her water jar behind to tell her neighbours about this man...she leaves her solitary task to enter into her community.

She saw something in that encounter with Jesus that caused her to see differently. In Jesus, she could now see the whole person. There was something about the faith that he embodied that called on others to see differently, to see themselves differently, see the world differently and see God differently. One wonders how many others got a clearer vision for their lives because of their encounter with Jesus, who could see so clearly all that made up the whole person, the strengths and weaknesses, the rejection and the prejudices, the national, cultural and even personal divides...yet he still sought to include them.

As a people of faith, this story serves as a reminder for each of us, that ours is a faith that requires seeing the whole person. We need to ask ourselves, "How am I, when it comes to looking at the whole person?" Are we looking for wholeness in life...or do we settle for the brokenness, the bits and pieces and figure that is the best we can hope for?

After all, when we look at others and I would say even when it comes to ourselves, at best we see bits and pieces, we seldom, if ever see the whole. We are confronted with this sort of thing head on right now as we watch Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton slug it out in the U.S. presidential campaign. Every day, we are treated to new tidbits and items that are meant to be used in such a way to shape opinion of each candidate. It is politics. And as we know in our world, too often politics, as it has infiltrated so many aspects of our life, even and sometimes especially religion, has come to mean division because we choose to deal in bits and pieces, we choose to accept the brokenness. Like the newly named winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature Bob Dylan once wrote in a hit song of his, "everything is broken."

We see the divisions and make these the starting point as we deal with issues. This is how politics seems to work, we have parties who find themselves over here who say, "this is what we see," "this is what's important" "we worship God on this mountain." And then we have another group over here that says, "this is what we see," "this is what's important," "we worship God on this mountain"...and on it goes. The goal it seems, is division, staying with the bits and the pieces, that we like, that we are born into, that we identify with. We are unable to see the whole or choose not to see the whole. Even our social idealism in life can become like the one depicted in an old story about a Russian Empress who wept copious tears at the tragedy that she watched acted out on the stage of the Moscow Opera House, while her

coachman froze to death sitting on his coach seat, waiting for her outside the Opera House. The bits and pieces distract us from seeing a bigger picture.

It is this bigger picture that our scripture story reminds us of today, of the grace that occurs when our lives intersect with another, and we find ourselves growing in wholeness. For God you see, begins with wholeness. The story of Creation in the Bible begins with the unity of God, John's gospel begins with the words that "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God, all things came into being through him." You see ours is a faith that begins with wholeness, and as the light of the world, Jesus seeks to cast light on this wholeness...he embodies this wholeness...reveals this wholeness...even when others threaten to break it down or prevent people from seeing it.

Think of our sacrament of Baptism in relationship to how we are born into this world. In many ways, the divisions and the bits and pieces are already thrust upon us, depending on our gender, the family we are born into, the country we are born in and so on. Yet here we are willing to make a declaration, that we are one in the baptism we share...one in something much greater than ourselves...greater than the bits and pieces. We bring to mind the wholeness we believe in, in spite of these divisions, knowing that in our baptism God sees us for who we are, takes us how we are, our whole selves with a declaration of unconditional love.

Now this kind of faith isn't always an easy thing to declare. It can be so difficult to not only see, but accept the whole person...even when God does...and God does. You see, our baptism is an acknowledge of this. When we receive the waters of our baptism, this has less to do with how we see ourselves and more to do with how we are meant to see others in the light of faith.

This was brought to mind for me a little while ago when I was visiting a colleague in ministry in her office at the congregation she serves. As I looked around her office and made myself comfortable, I was struck by one shelf in the corner of her office that was filled with all sorts of little bottles of water. I was curious and asked her what the deal was with this particular collection. Well, she shared with me that she doesn't travel much, she has a severe phobia when it comes to flying, so she tends not to go too far. But, her friends, who know this about her, when they visit different places, they bring her back a bottle of water that she uses

for baptism. For her, using this water in baptism is a reminder of just how far reaching and inclusive, our baptism is meant to be. It even connects us with people, time and places we may have never visited or seen.

It's along the lines of what the 12<sup>th</sup> century mystic Hildegard of Bingen was thinking when she said of our Christian faith that, "Rivers of living water are to be poured out over the whole world, to ensure that people, like fishes caught in a net, can be restored to wholeness."

You see, wholeness...our wholeness...the wholeness of humanity does not exist in the bits and pieces...wholeness is not limited to it my life and my connection to my cultural heritage or place in life. It comes...just as Christ comes, when we can look to the another and see the whole person and the love God has for them too.

Thanks be to God.