

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, March 19, 2017

Hear a reading from the Gospel of John 4:5-42

⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria . . . ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. ⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" . . .

⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? . . ."

¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶ He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

¹⁹ "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. . . ."

²¹ "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me . . . a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

²⁵ The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

This ends the reading from the Gospel of John. Thanks be to God.

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She had everything stacked against her and yet she persisted.

“I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1803; was left an orphan at five years of age; was bound out in a clergyman’s family; had the seeds of piety and virtue early sown in my mind, but was deprived of the advantages of education, though my soul thirsted for knowledge. Left them at fifteen years of age; attended Sabbath schools until I was twenty; in 1826 was married to James W. Stewart; was left a widow in 1829; was, as I humbly hope and trust, brought to the knowledge of the truth, as it is in Jesus, in 1830; in 1831 I made a public profession of my faith in Christ.”

Married at 23, widowed at 26, converted at 27; Maria Stewart challenges a nation at 28.

It’s 1831 and in the culture of her day, Maria Stewart has four strikes against her. She is Black; she is female; she is young; and she is widowed—in era where all four designations were horribly disrespected and dishonored.

Yet, Maria Stewart marches into the office of William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the *Liberator*, an Abolitionist newspaper. She demands that Garrison publish her letter to her fellow Black sisters of the Spirit. He does.

In the fall of 1831, she hands Garrison the manuscript of her challenge to African Americans to sue for their rights. Here we have a young, female, African American widow writing in a white male abolitionist tabloid as a spiritual director to motivate her people to learning and action—based upon being created in the image of God.

“It is not the color of the skin that makes the person, but it is the principles formed within the soul.” Stewart inspires her audience to see who they are in Christ.

“Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; *but God* does not consider you as such. He hath formed and fashioned you in his own glorious image, and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect. He hath made you to have dominion over the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, and the fish of the sea (Genesis 1:26). He hath crowned you with glory and honor; hath made you but a little lower than the angels (Psalms 8:5).”

In 1831, *no one* was telling young Black women that they were formed in God’s image. No one was telling young Black women that they had God-given powers of reason and intellect. No one was telling young Black women that they had dominion and honor. No one...*but God*...and no one *but Maria Stewart*.

She had everything stacked against her and yet she persisted.

Liz Murray was born to poor and drug-addicted parents in the Bronx. Her mother was legally blind due to a degenerative eye disease that she had since birth which she qualified for and received a monthly welfare check. Family life revolved around the first of the month—the day the welfare check was due. On that day, food was abundant. However, within five days, the money would be gone and for the rest of the month, Murray and her sister survived on egg and mayonnaise sandwiches. They

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attempted to squelch the pain in their burning stomachs by consuming ice cubes, tooth paste—even Chapstick.

Although she tried to be a good student at school, she was self-conscious about stench that she gave off from her unwashed body and squalid clothing.

Liz’s mother was diagnosed with AIDS and lived the remainder of her life in a hospital. Her father moved into a homeless shelter, her older sister lived with friends, and Liz moved into a group home, though she soon left the deplorable circumstances of the home, dropped out of school, and found herself along with a friend, sleeping on the D train. She was suddenly homeless at the age of 15.

At age 16, Murray’s mother passed away. When her mother died, Murray had an epiphany: “Life was malleable. If I could have a family and a home one night and all of it is gone the next, that must mean that life has the capacity to change. And then I thought, Whoa! That means that just as change happens to me, I can cause change in my life.” Murray realized that life could be anything she wanted it to be. This pivotal turning point caused Murray to make her first real commitment – to high school. She heard about alternative high school. She researched and went to as many school interviews as she could.

Dressed in her Goth attire and avoiding eye contact, she went on interviews and was not offered admission to any schools she had applied to. One day she made a critical decision. Should she use her remaining money for a subway token to go on an interview, or to buy a slice of pizza? She opted for the token, which led her to meet with a teacher named Perry, who accepted her into the Humanities Preparatory Academy as long as she agreed that he would be her mentor.

Liz studied and completed four years of high school in two years as a straight-A student. Perry inspired and encouraged Liz to apply to Harvard, which she did and was accepted. Through generous scholarships and help from strangers after hearing her story, she completed her degree at Harvard.

Her teacher Perry disclosed that he had a mentor, who also had a mentor. This act of paying it forward has been embedded in Ms. Murray. She is an inspirational speaker touching the hearts of all who listen, whether it’s a troubled youth or an adult who can make a difference in someone else’s life.

As amazing as Murray’s transformation is, equally important is Murray’s resolve to carve a life for herself that was not limited by her past. Murray is adamant that people should not use their past as an excuse not to take opportunities; every new moment is a new opportunity, and no one knows what is possible until doing it.

She had everything stacked against her and yet she persisted.

About four years ago, a Boston woman bought a small granite bench and installed it at a bus stop near her hour. “It’s my neighborhood,” she said in response to comments from friends. “Who better to tend it than me?”

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The bench sat, and people sat on it: art students, coming and going from their classes; a mother and her kindergartener who huddled under an umbrella on rainy mornings; the occasional homeless person who stopped to rest; a cluster of teenagers piled on top of each other, waiting for a parade.

One morning the bench was covered with bold letters in black and fluorescent pink. Somebody's spray paint signature. The woman bought some solvent, put on a mask and gloves, and scrubbed it off with a steel brush that left little pink and black shadows. Another time it said "Fuck Jews." She put on the mask again and scrubbed until only shadows were left. And another time and another.

"I bought it," she said. "Who cares about it more than I do?" One day, the bench lay on the ground, its mortar joints broken. She re-mortared it.

Bus passengers came and went. Some read, some listened to music. Some simply sat and waited. Some left garbage: orange peels, Starbucks cups, paper bags, soda cans. The woman picked them up when she walked past. "I want it to be beautiful and clean here," she said. "Who can I expect to pick up the garbage if I don't?"

Recently, it lay in pieces again. This time, a part of the top slab was broken off. The woman cursed and cried, and her children cried because she was crying. She wasn't quite sure what to do, so the bench parts sat for a week, the legs and broken slab stacked by the sidewalk. Young people with iPods sat on the stack and waited for buses.

Finally the woman recruited neighbors who helped her load it into her old station wagon. She drove it to a mason who said he could cut off the broken part and make the bench shorter. He did, beautifully, apologizing that he couldn't get off the shadows. He reinstalled the short bench, drilling rebar into the legs and the cement on which the bench rested. "There," he said. "Now it won't go anywhere." That afternoon people began sitting on it again.

Five days later, the slab was off of the legs again, tested by vandals who found that the joint adhesive hadn't adhered properly. The woman sighed and pushed on the legs. They weren't going anywhere. She bent and ran her fingers across the shadow of graffiti tracery that made a soft, multi-colored patina on the slab, which lay on the ground beside the legs. Then she walked home and fetched her husband to help her set it back in place with another round of mortar.

Goodness is often painstaking. Evil or destruction--is easy. It is fast and frequently dramatic. It is bold and sure of itself. But goodness is tenacious. It grows out of the humble, persistent efforts of individuals who are determined to bring beauty and caretaking to the people that they touch and the communities in which they live.

She had everything stacked against her and yet she persisted.

She has been married and divorced five times. As a Samaritan woman, she is part of the outcast group – racially profiled and ethnically oppressed. She is a woman in a stunted male-dominated world; and she has become dependent on others. Sitting at the well, doing all of the lowly and dirty

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work of chores, she encounters a stranger who sees beyond the circumstance, beyond the outward appearances that belie all that is stacked against her. This stranger sees her and does not think of her as a sinner, as somehow deserving to be an outcast, to be in poverty, or oppressed.

This stranger sees something inside, a person of promise, a person of faith – a faith she didn't even realize was there deep inside.

Yet from the moment they connect, from the conversation and humanity of the moment, she leaves her water pot at the well and goes to tell others. She leaves behind the symbol of all of the chores and difficulties in her life and she moves forward into something new.

Her past does not define her. Her circumstance and her work and her place in society do not define her. This Samaritan woman persists in doing justice and kindness. She persists in telling others of the freedom her faith has brought her.

Jesus knows you are more than the sum of your burdens; Jesus knows you are more than labels and names assigned to you; Jesus knows that you are a person of promise and hope.

So persist in faith to be generous and kind.

Amen.