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The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Beyond Bad Things
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Bryan Stevenson has one of the most Christ-like attitudes about people. If you have been listening to or reading my sermons for a while then you know I often reference Mr. Stevenson who is a Black man, a lawyer, and the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. His book about his work with people on death row called *Just Mercy* is not only a bestseller it was the inspiration for a movie with the same title. I have followed his career since the 1980's because I admire his passion, dedication, and care for people most of society seem content to ignore and dismiss. But what I admire most about him isn't his advocacy work, it is his theology and fundamental belief about human beings.

This belief is what has kept him going for so many years through difficult and stressful work. The belief that none of us should be defined by the worst thing we have done. He writes in his book, "the bad things that happen to us don't define us."

This remarkable mindset does not neglect the significance of accountability, he believes criminal and harmful activity needs to be addressed and punishment befitting a crime is necessary and appropriate. What I find fascinating is how his belief allows him to recognize the wholeness of each person he meets and helps him connect with them. It's how he practices compassion in place of being judgmental. This is how Mr. Stevenson can see beyond stereotypes, fear, and all the stuff that can separate us, and enables him to participate in the Kingdom of God here on earth, helping to heal injustice, and the harm injustice creates.

While he has never said where his belief comes from, Bryan Stevenson has been a church member for most of his life, and it is possible he could have been inspired by Gospel encounters like the one we have today when Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well.

This encounter is not only the longest recorded conversation with one person in the New Testament, but also rich with so much good news. Unfortunately, too many of us can get hung up with the detail we assume is something bad about the woman revealed by the number of husbands she had that we try and force the entire narrative to revolve around that one detail. When we look closely at the conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well,

however, we discover Jesus was not focused on that part of the woman's life. He mentioned it not in judgment but to reveal who he is. This is remarkable because the woman at the well is the first person in John's Gospel Jesus tells simply and plainly who he is. Jesus obviously did not define the woman by the number of husbands she had. Instead, he recognized something remarkable about her, not something sinful in need of redemption.

So, if this story isn't another "redeemed sinner" story, what is it? To figure that out, we need to practice what Bryan Stevenson believes: bad things that happen do not define us. When we can look beyond the number of husbands, we can recognize there is so much that is deeply good in today's Gospel reading: the Kingdom of God stuff that heals deep divisions and brings new life to the world.

Many scholars and commentators don't seem to know what to do with the Samaritan woman in today's Gospel. They suspect because she isn't given a name, she probably never existed and is most likely a representative for all Samaritans. Perhaps they are right. But we need to remember this is John's Gospel and the author's style of writing is complex and layered. That means the woman in today's Gospel may be a stand in for an entire people, she may have been inspired by an actual person or event or be a means of addressing issues in the community John's Gospel was written in, or something else, or bit of all of the above. The point is, whenever we look at John's Gospel, we need to remember all these factors might be in play, because that can help us get closer not only to the author's intention, but to the Holy Spirit present through the Gospel.

The woman in today's Gospel doesn't get a name and we are constantly reminded she was a foreigner. Perhaps you have read about or heard about the enmity between Samaritans and Jews. Perhaps you have also heard or read that in the culture of Jesus' time, it was considered inappropriate for men and women who were not related to talk to each other in public. So, if a Jewish man initiated a conversation with a Samaritan woman, it would be comparable to a republican and democratic socialist having a conversation in our modern times. The two didn't mix, and usually were more invested in maintaining the divide between them than in learning from each other. That is why the disciples were so taken aback when they saw Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman.

Their conversation isn't only long, it shows they are engaged as equals. Jesus started the conversation simply by requesting a drink of water, which was probably a way of meeting the woman where they both were instead of addressing a physical need. Notice no one got any water from the well. The

woman's water container was even left behind. She didn't need it because their conversation was a giving and receiving of living water, always going one step deeper into the stuff of God's Kingdom. Because they kept listening to each other and learning from each other, it became a life-giving conversation for both of them.

The woman who would have been his enemy became the sower Jesus mentioned when talking with his disciples, the one who planted the seed of faith in the people of her city. Notice how she invited them to come and engage with Jesus, she didn't insist on it, she invited them to experience for themselves what she had encountered. The people in the city received this invitation and then went on to grow into a deeper faith. That is how an entire city of what would have been enemies of Jesus came to embrace Jesus.

That makes this an encounter of healing a divide that isn't really between two religions, but people and God. The people in the village grew closer to God without being forced to change their nationality or religion. They were invited to meet Jesus and decided to make room for him in their lives.

That is not the only breach that was bridged in today's Gospel. The disciples who were on the sidelines got to witness and hopefully learn that following Jesus is not only for them. Jesus intentionally invites all people, people of all races, genders, colors, political affiliations, physical and mental abilities, socioeconomic status, education levels, and ages to follow him and participate in God's Kingdom here and now in this world and doing so can heal whatever divides us from each other and from God.

Such miracles of healing are possible, as evidenced in the work of people like Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative. It begins when we practice the loving compassionate way of Jesus by refusing to let bad things define ourselves, each other, or any person and learn to welcome each other as equally beloved children of God.