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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year A

John 4:5-42

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

I have a friend who is a pastor in the Seattle area. With the Coronavirus widespread there his church has suspended worship services for the time being. Pastor Kevin is kind of a casual guy, but lately has taken up the practice of wearing his clerical collared shirts on a daily basis as a way to display his role more publicly.

He's doing that because instead of sequestering himself away from the world in a time of fear—especially in the hot bed of this particular virus—Pastor Kevin is taking daily walks through his part of the city.

Sometimes people stop and engage him in conversation, maybe in part because they are seeking some reassurance or spiritual wisdom from him. But one day he stopped to visit with a woman who positions herself near the post office selling a local newspaper called "Real Change".

I researched the paper and found that their vendors are homeless or low-income people. The newspaper sells for \$2, of which the publisher gets 60 cents and the vendor keeps the rest.

In his conversation with this particular salesperson, named Debbie, Pastor Kevin learned a little about where she grew up and that she likes her job. At the end of the conversation she asked him to buy a paper. He told her he didn't have \$2 on him, but that he would go to the bank and be back. She looked like she didn't believe him. She'd probably heard that line before.

Eventually he came back and he asked her, "If you sell all your papers do you get to go home?" "Yes," she said. He asked how many she had left and she counted out about 15. "Then I'll buy all your papers," he said, and offered her \$30.

"I can't sell them all to you," she answered. "I have regular customers who would be disappointed." "OK," he said, "I'll take ten," and handed her a twenty. As he turned to leave, she called out, "Preacher, God bless you." Pastor Kevin turned back and said, "God bless you, too."

Unlike the Samaritan woman at the well, the newspaper vendor, Debbie, has a name that is known, at least to Pastor Kevin. Knowing someone's name is often the first step in making an authentic connection with another person.

We don't ever find out the Samaritan woman's name, but we find out some things about her that somehow seem shameful or maybe just sad and disappointing. Her five husbands had probably each died or divorced her, since marriage was something that was done TO a woman in those days.

And the man she lives with could very well be the brother of the last husband who died who was obligated to bring her into his home. Whatever the situation, she comes to the well at noon, when the other women have come in the cool of the morning or evening. Clearly, she is not included in their social circles.

Living at the low end of the economic scales can be shameful or disappointing or just not what some people choose for themselves, although it seems as if Debbie has found value and joy in the work she is able to do.

Pastor Kevin is venturing out into a world that others are afraid to enter these days. Jesus, too, crossed boundaries, boundaries of ethnic and social norms, to speak with someone his disciples would have rather overlooked.

In Jesus' conversation with the woman she shared some of her story. And even though Jesus seemed to already know it, that was a vulnerable thing for her to do. Jesus saw her. Jesus knew her. And her response is to run to her community and share this good news.

I wonder what Debbie told her family or the rest of her customers later that day. I wonder if she gained a new awareness that religious leaders can be caring and compassionate rather than critical or condemning. I wonder if she sensed the presence of Christ in Pastor Kevin's simple conversation and act of generosity.

In last Sunday's gospel, Jesus told an educated Jewish leader named Nicodemus who snuck out to find him in the middle of the night that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

In today's passage, Jesus lives out this declaration to a nameless outsider who he meets in the brightness of the day. Jesus brought the Samaritan woman into relationship with God, which is the very definition of salvation in John's gospel.

The world God so loves includes Jews and Samaritans, pastors and those who earn their living selling newspapers. God loves the world by overlooking the boundaries we set up to protect ourselves from condemnation or disrespect or even physical threats like viruses we cannot see.

God loves the world by drawing people together through the life given freely by the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Pastor Kevin offered Debbie a chance to earn her full wage for the day and some free time that was likely a rare treat for her. But, like the Samaritan woman, Debbie was concerned not only for her own wellbeing but for her community of customers with whom she may have shared her story of grace that day.

Jesus offered the Samaritan woman the gift of living water that quenches our thirst for love and acceptance and brings forth eternal life. Sometimes we are in need of this living water ourselves. And sometimes we are the ones who can offer it to others—those who long to be seen and known and invited into relationship with God and with us.

We have received this same living water in the waters of Holy Baptism where we are named and known by God and brought into loving community with God and God's people.

In these days of worry and fear, may we hold on to the peace we have through our Lord Jesus, whose life is our hope and salvation. And let us share this gift of life with the world God so loves as a way to say, "God bless you" to those we meet.

Thanks be to God! Amen

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

With the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, let us pray for the church, those in need, and all of God's creation.

*Silence for reflection*

O God, you hear us when we call to you.

We pray for your church, our pastors and teachers, and all who call upon your name. You have blessed us to be a blessing to the world. Make us bold to tell the stories of your love and to live as your light to the nations. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

We pray for the well-being of all creation and all people. Guide leaders of nations and communities to serve with justice and inspire us to work for peace and equity in the places we live. In the wake of the Coronavirus, give wisdom to those making decisions that impact childcare, income resources, and those who are most vulnerable to this illness. Strengthen medical personnel who work among the sick; give them courage and confidence in all they do. Be with us all, and give us peace at all times and in every way; through Christ our peace. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

We pray for all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit. Send your healing to the sick and injured, your comfort to the dying and those who grieve, and strength to the weak. Send us out to serve as your presence to those in need of your care, especially Loyd Bowen who is now on Hospice care and for Pam as she attends to her own health. We also pray for Kathie, Jessie, Kyle and Ed.

Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Receive the prayers of our children...

Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

We offer to you, O God, the prayers of your people, placed upon this wooden cross. Bring your blessing and power to these situations in need of your grace and love.

Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

**Amen**