

**Suffering and Salvation in African-American Spirituals (III):
The Trouble We've Seen
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: John 4:5-42**

My late father used to tease his three clergy daughters with a saying he swore he hadn't made up. *A preaching woman is like a dog balancing on his hind legs: the wonder of it is not how well they do it, but that they do it at all.* I think he enjoyed the inevitable groans and protestations we would make afterward, even though we knew he didn't really believe that....did he?? In the first preaching class I took at Princeton, the professor—a highly regarded pulpiter--allowed as how women could preach, but would we please lower the pitch of our voices *so we wouldn't sound shrill.* I internalized these messages as indicators that there was indeed something odd and unpleasant about a woman speaking with authority from the pulpit. It took awhile for me to "find my voice" –to affirm (to myself, let alone to a congregation) that God had called me to a preaching ministry, and to believe that I could be a worthy witness to the Gospel.

This year and next mark milestone anniversaries of women's ordained roles in the Presbyterian Church (USA): the 100th anniversary of women as deacons; the seventy-fifth anniversary of women as elders; and the fiftieth anniversary of women as ministers of Word and Sacrament. Such occasions provide opportunity for celebrating the gifts women bring to the Church, even as they prompt wondering about whom else is excluded from leadership in the church, and at what cost?

Lance Bryant, in his recent Fairmount lecture and concert on sacred jazz, noted the roots of this music in the Black church. Both –the music and the worship—have structure, yet value freedom for the Spirit to move. No two musicians will play a spiritual in exactly the same way; each person hears it differently and plays it from that unique perspective. The Presbyterian Church, with our cherished tradition of order and form, can learn from the insight of our African-American brothers and sisters. Our faith community, no less than jazz music, is richer for the riffs and cadenzas of diverse players: women as well as men, of every age and color and human distinction. *Everyone prays in his or her own language,* said the great Duke Ellington; in that amazing array of voices we may find God closer than we ever imagined.

...which is exactly what happens in the morning gospel reading. Jesus engages a stranger in a discussion about water, about what produces and nourishes life. The stranger is so taken with what Jesus says, that the daily routine is interrupted so that this incredible good news can be shared with the neighbors. To understand the significance of this text, you need to know about the stranger: she was a woman, and strictly forbidden from conversation with a man in public; she was a Samaritan woman, viewed by the Jews of Jesus' day as religious traitors and heretics to be shunned; and she was a Samaritan woman with a past. Checkered marital history—five husbands; cohabitation; biblical commentators think it odd that she would be coming to the well at midday, since early morning was the more typical time for the daily chore of drawing water. It wasn't a solitary task either; women and girl children gathered at the well for socializing, for sharing, sort of the first century version of the small group experience. The fact that she was alone there suggests that she felt excluded from that comfortable circle of female companionship. She had seen her share of trouble, and felt cut off from familiar sources of strength and support. Reading the text with me today is Terra Winston, a new member of our congregation who is exploring her own call to ministry. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the fourth chapter at the fifth verse; if you wish to read along in the chapel/pew Bibles, the text is found on page _____ of the New Testament section. [John 4:5-30, 39-42]

One of the reasons African-American spirituals hold such universal appeal is because they bubbled up out of a people's shared experience; almost none of them has been attributed to a particular composer. The spiritual we're considering this week, *Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen*, is believed to express the grief of a mother witnessing her daughter being sold away to another slave owner, of her mourning not only the separation but the anguish she hears in the cries of her child. [Gwendolin Sims Warren, *Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit*,] Henry Holt and Co., 1997, p. 69] Sadly this would not have been a singular experience during the period of slavery in the United States; families were regularly split up, depending upon the employment needs of slave owners seeking field laborers, house workers, someone to care for the master's children (I've heard social scientists hypothesize that this practice not fully acknowledged or dealt with may be a contributing factor to the instability of many African-American homes today).

A liner note in Charlie Haden and Hank Jones' incomparable collection of spirituals, hymns, and folk songs [*Steal Away*, Polydor/Polygram, 1995] claims that a single word change in the version sung today alters the meaning significantly.

Their research has uncovered an earlier form of the spiritual that goes "Nobody knows de trouble I've seen, nobody knows *like* Jesus." While Jesus is uniquely qualified to stand with us in suffering, the original wording suggests that others too have seen trouble and share a common bond because of it. We are not really isolated in grief, in guilt, in sorrow, even if we find it hard to let others know. The trouble we've seen is the trouble *they've* seen too. A great deal of the brokenness experienced in the human family springs from forgetting that the realities that unite us are far greater than the differences that divide us. It is a universal human tendency to consider one's own experience as normative; the powerful have the ability to codify it, make it the law of the land or the practice of the church, and in so doing exclude others who have different perceptions of reality, different ways of navigating the world, even different appearance, or voice pitch and demeanor. The African-American civil rights movement, the women's movement and today, the struggle for civil and ecclesiastical rights for gay and lesbian persons are about the common humanity we share, and the equality needed to heal our broken community.

Jesus' discussion with the woman at the well both diagnoses this condition, at the same time offering a cure in the water he gives. The narrator cannot avoid marveling at their encounter, both because of their different religious identities (he a Jew, she a Samaritan, and *Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans....not even water dippers*), and their different genders (after the disciples return, *they were astonished that he was speaking with a woman*). He's pushed the conventional barriers just in asking her for a drink of water. Everything after that is radical and new: he points out her personal situation, yet doesn't condemn her. He shows her that the true worship of God transcends either of the sacred locales which separate their two religions. The living water Jesus provides breaks down the dam that has kept us at arm's length, suspicious of and hostile towards one another. Jesus loves with inclusive love, and provides the one thing that will quench our thirst for life, the only balm that will bring peace to our troubled souls, the gift that will restore broken community.

We catch a glimpse of how it could be, as she and Jesus go back and forth. Don't let the archaic issue of where to worship God cause you to miss the liveliness of this exchange. The woman at the well is no shrinking violet! She is a far cry from Mary who sat at Jesus' feet and listened respectfully as he taught. This woman is what some might call a pushy woman with her persistent questions; maybe she was even a little shrill when she compared Jesus with her ancestor Jacob. She challenged Jesus about where he might get a bucket to draw water, and got in his face about the real Messiah who would tell them what they needed to

know. Her questions and her courage in asking them of Jesus helped satisfy her soul's thirst--not unlike those pushy and persistent people who have questioned unjust laws, refused to give up their seat on the bus, or repeatedly asked to be included....and who have witnessed the walls come tumblin' down.

I love the little detail the text reveals that in her haste to go back to the city to bring others to meet Jesus, she leaves her water jar at the well. She is so eager to share this Source of living water, it's no longer business as usual. She can't think of anything except to get her neighbors connected to the pipeline from which flows abundant life. She recognized in Jesus someone who knew her troubles and offered an alternative way. This woman is remembered as the first evangelist, the first person who shared the good news of Jesus Christ with others. When have you and I felt compelled to do that?

I am part of a group of senior ministers organized by former Fairmount pastor Hank Andersen, who meet twice annually for fellowship and learning. In one of my first times with the group, I remember a colleague characterizing Fairmount as "a sleeping giant," and I wondered what it would take to wake us up. Now after four years, here's what I think: each member leaving something of themselves here in this place, and going to tell someone about the nourishment, the balm for the troubles you've seen, the living water in the presence of God you've experienced here. That's it: I think each of us has to find his or her own voice to witness to what we know (even if it simply is to articulate the questions you have), to witness to what we have seen and heard and tasted. Maybe it's not a finely crafted systematic theological vision (and if it is I want to talk with you!). Maybe you deliver it in a high-pitched squeak. Perhaps my dad was right after all: the wonder is not how well we do it, but that we do it at all. For remember the woman at the well: someone who was the wrong person, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, who invited her neighbors and naysayers to come and meet Jesus.

And remember, friends, what happened when she did. *It's no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.* They confessed something beyond what she had told them; they "got it" perhaps even better than she did, or at least they contributed to a growing understanding of Jesus' identity and purpose. So it will be as you and I go and tell: each new member, every visitor and friend, filling in the blank spaces in our picture of what a vibrant faith community is, asking different questions, finding sweet, life-giving water in most unexpected places to pour healing over the troubles we've all seen. And

just imagine what will happen when, by the grace of God, this sleeping giant awakens!

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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