

Christian Unity Meditation

Peter JB Carman

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The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

The Gospel of John has some of the best stories in the New Testament. Among these stories is the conversation between Jesus and a sharp-tongued Samaritan woman by Jacob's well. Ever noticed that in the New Testament the only people who really **successfully** challenge Jesus and draw him out are women? And in this case it is a Samaritan woman, a woman from a people closely related to the Judeans but with their own distinct beliefs, often in considerable ethnic tension with their cousins, seen as less-than and even unclean. The banter between her and Jesus testifies to Jesus' willingness to engage in deep conversation across the usual boundaries of race and class and gender and even the shape of one's family. That is why our Brazilian brothers and sisters, to whom Graymoor turned for this year's service order and readings for the week of prayer for Christian Unity, turned to this passage of scripture.

What is it that unites us today as Christians, if not all the time then at least when we are at our best? I want to suggest to this northern crowd that the historical moment of the dictatorship in Brazil in the latter part of the twentieth century, and the outspoken witness of Roman Catholics both in at land and in other suffering Latin American nations, is the source of much of the best of what unites us across the lines of denomination and tradition today. For in that troubled time, at the worst moment of oppression, Roman Catholic Bishops and clergy, traditionally an elite group in that part of the world, decided that they must listen to the people of God, listen to the peasants, the poor, the landless. Out of that listening process arose something eventually called the theology of liberation—but it really was a return to the spirit of Jesus, willing to listen and engage in dialogue with foreigners, with those considered heretics, with the unclean, and with women as fully as men.

This past August I returned from my second trip to Northeast Brazil, a land which continues to struggle with police brutality but is now a proud and

functioning democracy; where a tiny percentage owns the vast majority of the land, but the law provides rights to the landless to reclaim that which they have lost. In northeast Brazil where I was visiting, protestants have now picked up the banner of the earlier generation of liberation minded Catholics, and while national and international leaders disagree and retrench, at the grassroots level a small but vibrant ecumenical movement insists on the rights of women and racial minorities and the native peoples. It is a place where in small ecumenical meetings of Catholics and Protestants, the participants end up dancing together before they go home. I was inspired by my visit, inspired by seeing the same Spirit that had seized Dom Helder Camara, still at work, now among Protestants as well as Catholics.

As we contemplate what Christian unity means in this time, in this little city, we cannot simply import some message from afar! If we are to follow this Jesus, the Jesus of John's gospel, the Jesus who was not afraid to cross the line in order to be in solidarity with every human child of God, then it begins with listening. It begins with being honest about who the Samaritan is now, to each of us. For each of us carries our own prejudice and fear, whether born of religious suspicion or ethnic mistrust, or the legacy of generations of hate. Who is our Samaritan neighbor? And to whom are WE the Samaritan neighbor? And what does this moment in history call us to, in prayer, in reflection together, in action?

As we gather on this Wednesday just before the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., let us acknowledge it has never been easier for Christians of different stripes and traditions to come together in unity. Not easy! But easier than it has been! Nothing prevents us from finding a common voice together around issues of racial injustice—nothing but fear. Nothing prevents us from listening to the woman at the well: working to empower the poor together. Nothing except old assumptions. Nothing prevents us from worshiping together like this, as much as we want—nothing but institutional preoccupations. There is One who is much bigger than these fears and preoccupations, so much more lovely. For God is not found in the Protestant enclaves or the Orthodox high places or the Catholic cathedrals No, as Jesus has told us, the God we share is the God who is spirit, the God who is in the midst of us.

I stand before you today as one Protestant preacher to thank the Catholic Church for the good news that God has a preferential option – for the poor, the oppressed. We worship a God who is not far off, not some old man sitting on this high place or that, but a living spirit, right in the midst of us. This living spirit calls us together to be one people, united not so much by doctrine, nor even by service for service sake but united in that very Spirit who is God among us. This God is real, is powerful from the bottom up. This God is the love that opens our ears, tears open our hearts.

The Spirit of God is ultimately our unity—One who brings us together in walking with Jesus, no matter how reluctantly or readily, whether we stumble,

stroll or dance. The Spirit lives. This is our living water, this the well we drink from, this the wind that moves us, this the air we breathe: the God in our bodies, our bones. So we are one, already. Before God, and in God already we—all of us—are one.