

“Going Together”

[John 4:1-29](#)

Thank you, choir. That was wonderful! The last time I stood here on Epiphany Sunday I was dazzled by your new robes, vibrant music, beauty and grace, as we led worship together. I’m delighted to share with you once again this morning in the absence of our traveling pastors who last week worshipped in Free-town where they reportedly enjoyed a *seven-minute sermon* in a *two-hour service*! So here’s the deal: I promise we won’t be here for two hours! Yet I also guarantee my sermon will last more than seven minutes. So I’d better get started!

I begin with an African proverb that says:

*If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.*

Which is really all that I’ve come to say this morning. So hear it again!

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In a recent sermon a friend of mine told this story:

Our son Owen was born just as Hurricane Katrina approached the Gulf Coast. Two days later, as Katrina neared landfall, Owen began suffering seizures; he’d had a stroke. I didn’t follow the catastrophe on the Gulf Coast as closely as I might have, but those weeks taught me some things about catastrophe and about the kindness of strangers. . . .

At the hospital, despite the tubes dripping and the monitors beeping, our son Owen still slept his baby sleep. My wife asked for the pastor; I asked for the doctor. She prayed for him. I held the CAT scan up to the light and searched for answers.

No one can know what you will feel or fear in a time of need, but I learned that in this, the most difficult time of my life, the people our family depended upon most were people we had never met, people who we would likely never see again — *strangers*.

We depended upon *strangers* who knew their duty was to help others. We depended upon the *nurses* who cared so well for our son, who cooed to him and caressed him, who watched me hold him through the night and never seemed to notice how ugly a man is when he cries. We depended upon the *hostel* that gave us a place to stay near the hospital, upon the *members* of my union, who believed caring for our child’s health should not ruin us, upon the *doctors and clerks and ambulance drivers*. We depended upon a commitment made to helping others. This commitment is a web that holds us together in times of need, a web of compassion, a web of love.

By the time we took Owen home, the worst effects of Katrina were evident. I watched the images from the Gulf Coast, images of communities, lives and families whose fabric had been torn apart. And I thought of that *web of strangers* that had embraced my family in our time of need, and that it is the most fortunate among us who are served best by it. I can only hope this web [of

love and compassion] will be strong enough, that it will be spun wide, and that it will hold and care for many.¹

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With this in mind let's turn back to the story of the woman who met Jesus at the communal well in the heat of the day. Unlike the rest of the women in the village who went for water in the cooler hours of the morning or evening, this woman had taken to going to the well at off hours to get it done in a hurry so as to avoid the barbed looks and pointed comments of those who judged her life style and found her wanting. Though we don't know that, for sure. In fact, we really don't know much of anything about this woman other than she is a Samaritan by birth and a woman by gender, who has apparently been married many times and who is now living with yet another man. Which is why she comes to the well in the middle of the day to avoid the judgment and hostility of her neighbors.

Focused on the task at hand, she fails to see the stranger sitting there in the shade of a tree as if he's been waiting.

He speaks. His words startle her. "May I have a drink of water?" Shocked by the request she says to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a woman of Samaria, for a drink of water? You know that Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." Which was true. Jews and Samaritans hated each other with a hatred fueled by centuries of isolation, ignorance and fear. But Jesus doesn't seem to care about that. Ignoring even the custom that a man should not speak to a woman in public who is not his wife, Jesus asks for a drink of water fully aware that according to yet another custom if she does it, if she offers him the water and he accepts it, the gift becomes *a social contract of friendship* between them for one year. In other words, in asking for water Jesus a total stranger is asking to be her friend. In asking for nothing more than a cup of water Jesus bangs on the walls that divide them, hoping to shatter the rigidly defined cultural maps that were designed to keep everyone and everything unambiguously in its place: pure, impure; clean, dirty; right, wrong; blessed, cursed; male, female; slave, free; us, them.

Sounding a bit like Fred Rogers - *creator of his own beautiful neighborhood* – Jesus simply and intentionally ignores all that separates them and invites this particular woman to be his friend.

"Will you be my friend?" He asks her. And marveling at all he said and did, the woman runs back to town exclaiming, "Come see a man who told me all that I ever did. I wonder, could this be the Christ?" And her life is forever changed – from outcast to evangelist, from loner to neighbor!

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Sister Helen Prejean was recently in the area promoting her excellent new memoir River of Fire: My Spiritual Journey. Some of you may remember Sister Helen from an earlier book titled Dead Man Walking. Adapted into a hauntingly powerful film starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, the book chronicles what happened for her after becoming spiritual advisor to a convict named Matthew Poncelet during his last days on death row.

¹ Daniel Ferri, This I Believe.

Convicted of the brutal murder of two young people, Poncelet was a very unattractive man, a white supremacist, a macho braggart, a liar, and a killer. For her part, Prejean was (and is) a strong, clear-eyed woman who lived and worked in the worst ghetto of New Orleans.

Entering a prison for the first time in her life, Sister Helen had to improvise what it meant to be a spiritual advisor under such circumstances. And she improvised remarkably well.

Never acting as if she were better than Poncelet, or that she knew more than he did, or that she was there to judge, defend or try to save him, her behavior surprised the condemned man who said: "I thought you'd be doin' nothin' but preachin' to me, but after our first visit I saw I could just talk to you like a friend."

And she was a friend to him, willing to go deep into his pain and fear, willing to listen without trying to fix anything, just trying to understand. Which is what real friends do. Which may be why there are so few of them as many of us are too busy, too wrapped up in our own pressing affairs or glued to our devices, to take time to listen or to be present to others, to a neighbor maybe, or a colleague, or a child, or the person sitting beside you this morning, the one to whom you passed the peace!

Yet Sister Helen was in no such hurry. She simply showed up to listen and to share as honestly as she could, creating a web of friendship.

In the first days of the week before his execution, knowing time is running out, Sister Helen tells Poncelet what Jesus says in the gospel of John: *"You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free."*

The convict likes that because he thinks it means that he might still avoid an execution and perhaps get out of prison if he can get someone to believe the lies about his innocence.

So he keeps insisting to Sister Helen that he didn't kill or rape anyone, that it was his partner who went crazy on him. He blames it all on booze and drugs, his awful parents, the evil government, the families of the victims who are trying to kill him.

Finally, Sister Helen says to him, "Matthew, you keep blaming your parents, or drugs, or those poor kids being in the woods in their car that night, or their parents, or the evil government. But do you ever look at yourself? Do you think about what you did, the pain and suffering you caused the families of those two kids, taking the lives of people they loved so they'll never see them again, or hear their voices?"

Offering no cheap grace, Helen pressed him, held him accountable, as we ought to hold one another accountable, even those we are closest to, those we love, and those we maybe don't love very much. Each of us must be held accountable for our actions, our promises kept and broken, our mistakes and failures, whether you're a Hollywood mogul or the President of the United States. Our standard should always be:

"You shall know the truth and the truth – and the truth - shall make you free."

On the night he died, Poncelet finally confessed to what he had done. He cried as he did, after which Sister Helen said to him, "You can die in dignity now, Matthew. No one can take that away from you. You are a son of God."

He smiles and snuffles, this macho killer, and says, "No one never called me no son of God before. They called me a son of you-know-what, but never a son of God." And there is a look of wonder, even a kind of peace on his face.

Later, as he walks toward the death chamber, Poncelet falters and slips to his knees. Helen Prejean kneels with him. She says, "When you go into that room, keep your eyes on me. I want the last thing you see to be the face of love. I will be the face of love for you." And as the lethal drugs are injected into him, Poncelet and Prejean look intently, tenderly at each other, her lips moving in prayer, assuring him with the words, "I love you," as across the screen flash images of the terrible crime he committed and the faces of the two murdered young people. "I love you," she says, over and over again, "I love you," becoming for a dying man, "*The Face of Love*."

I think that's what the woman saw that day at the well. There in the heat of the afternoon, she saw *the Face of Love*, forgiveness and acceptance, and she was restored to the community. "*Come and see*," she exclaimed!

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Bob Goff is an extraordinarily bold and imaginative man, an attorney and a committed Christian, who believes that we are created to love. That should be our great purpose in life. Yet, he says, we cannot love others, like our neighbors, if we don't know them, talk to them, walk with them, eat with them, laugh and grieve with them. There's no school where you go to learn the art of loving your neighbor; there's just the house next door.

In his book, Everybody Always, Goff tells about the time he and his wife planned to sell their house and move across the street. Which meant that whoever bought their first home would become a neighbor. And so they interviewed everyone and finally decided that Carol would be the perfect neighbor. And as it turned out she was. She became family, hanging the kids' art on her refrigerator, never complaining about the frogs or lizards that got free in her house, never to be found. She babysat those kids, attended school plays, recitals, graduation ceremonies. And when the weddings finally came she was there as part of the family.

And then Carol was diagnosed with a cancer for which there was no cure.

About that time Bob and his wife decided to start a New Year's Day tradition of having a parade on their street. So they put out word, blew up 1000 helium balloons and prayed that this might help build a spirit of love and awareness among their neighbors. That first year 8 people showed up and together they marched down the street handing out balloons and waving at those who peered at them from behind their windows.

Today 4 to 500 people show up to march in that parade.

Every year they select a Grand Marshal and a Queen of the parade. One year Carol was Queen and she comported herself with such dignity and grace that forever after she was addressed as "*Your majesty*."

Then came the year that Carol knew she couldn't walk the route and so Bob loaded her in the side car of his motorcycle and drove her, wondering if this might be the last parade for her.

As it turned out, Carol survived another year and on the day of the parade Bob's sons swooped into her home like a small band of angels and carried her from her bedroom to the front window where she could hear and see it all. What she didn't know is that they re-routed the parade so that everyone of those 500 people walked through her yard, up to the window and waved, blew kisses, or pressed hands or noses against the glass.

A day or two later, Bob writes, Jesus lifted Carol to heaven for her second great parade of the week. But she didn't go alone. Buoyed by her own faith, she was additionally shrouded in the love, care and grace of her neighbors – bonds, cords and cables that could not and would not be broken!

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Dear friends, by consciously, intentionally loving others we might help change or transform them forever. Carol experienced that, Matthew Poncelet experienced that, as did that father in the ICU and that unnamed yet beloved woman at the well.

It is within the reach of any and every one of us, to take the time to look another in the face and ask through our care, our patience, and our compassion, will you be my friend? Will you be my neighbor? Will you let me share with you the grace of my love? I hope so. I hope you'll put your hand in my hand so that we can journey together, knowing that

*If you want to go fast, you should go alone
But if you want to far, you should go together.*

May we all choose to go together.

Amen!