

Title: Social Isolation, loneliness and the social deep freeze

Text: John 4:5-42

Rev. Sharon Smith

I have a friend, let's call her Carol (not her real name). We met at church about 15 years ago. She is quirky, so am I, I just know how to hide my quirks a little better than she does. She lives with Schizophrenia...

She is often sitting alone at church. She has been part of the same community for over 20 years. And she volunteers on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. She is the bulletin stuffer and pew sorter too! Yet though she is present, she is kept on the outside.

She once described her life at church as a 'social deepfreeze'.

You know that feeling we have every so often when everyone is interested in everybody else, and you are put aside for later?

That is her constant experience - the social deep freeze. She has gotten used to it.

Surrounded by people, yet experiencing social isolation.

Carol and I became friends because she was relentless in pursuing friendship with me. She would say: Sharon - God told me we are to be friends! Who can argue with that?

I have had some interesting moments with Carol. Mostly me helping her to navigate the health system. But there is one encounter that continues to amaze me.

I was working in the Downtown East Side for a one-year interim Executive Director at Jacob's Well. I was new to the context and new in the role. I was working hard and not seeing any impact. I kept going, pushing harder, pouring myself out and I was starting to suffer for it. I was 'burning out'.

One evening, alone in my apartment, I remember feeling great despair and loneliness - I threw my hands up in the air and I called out - God, I need you to help me. I am done. I am undone.

At 5am the next morning... my phone rang. The call display read: Carol!

My first thought: I need to teach her about appropriate times to call.

She said: Sharon. I am not sure if I am seeing things (hallucinating is part of her condition) or whether this is a spiritual vision but as I was going to bed last night I saw you with your hands in the air giving up and so I stayed up all night to pray for you. Are you OK?

I started to cry and Carol prayed for me over the phone. The love of Christ surrounded me.

**My story with Carol is actually an aged old story. It's a human story.
Based on an archetypal story of Encounter.**

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel - a gospel written many years after Jesus' life.

- Written out of a very well formed sense of Jesus as the Christ.
- And less about Jesus as a human person like you and me (like in Matthew, Mark and Luke)
- That is why John's gospel is so different to read, and relate to!

Yet because these stories are mystical, we can take them as archetypal stories, symbols of our experience, from multiple angles – providing **mirrors, that show our shadows and light.**

Jesus meets a person who is socially isolated, alone.

They meet at a place that is usually for gathering. It is a **sacred site.** Jacob's well.

A highly symbolized site.

Wells were a constant presence for the Jewish nation and the founding Fathers and Mothers as they moved from one place to another and were considered a gift of God.

It was at the well that Abraham's servant met Rebecca, Isaac's future wife, (Gen 24:13-30), that Jacob met Rachel (Gen 29:2-12) and that Moses met his future wife. (Ex 2:15-21).

Similarly the symbolism of water as the source of life and youth is closely linked to the cults of the peoples of the Middle East.

Abraham abandoned Ur with his family to go in search of water and fertile land.

It was because of water that the people doubted Yahweh in the desert and, in search of water, entered the fertile land of Canaan.

Water became the symbol of the human being's most profound search.

Jesus meets the woman at the well at noon:

- The expected time for women to gather at the well was in the cool of the evening to draw water for their households, and to chatter and share news and needs.
- The expected time for men would be different – shepherds or herdsmen or traders would come so as not to inappropriately approach women.
- Coming to the well during midday is unusual – why is she there alone? What has caused her isolation?
- Jesus comes alone – why did he approach even though he saw a woman there on her own?

She may wish to avoid meeting other women.

A woman alone at noon beside a well was a sign of impurity. Perhaps she was dishonoured, ashamed because of her multiple relationships with men, in a society where a single woman following a marriage was either absorbed into the husband's family (if widowed) or cast away.

And Jesus' approach embodies a cultural and gendered challenge to this woman's presence alone at a well.

A Samaritan woman speaking to a Jewish man?

“Samaria and Judea were adjacent Israelite kingdoms. While Samaritans and Jews were both Semitic people, descendants of the original twelve of Israel, they had been at odds with each other for centuries, and Jews normally didn't speak to Samaritan women.”

Cynthia Bourgois, *The Wisdom Jesus*

And as a man, the cultural stereotypes would be that the conversation would be of a sexual nature.

Yet Jesus relates to this woman establishing with her a vital and liberating relationship with uprightness and respect.

This archetypal story resonates with me profoundly. And brings one of the shadows of our culture into focus.

Many of us are experiencing self-isolation for health reasons in this strange time of a viral outbreak.

Yet, a 2019 Angus Reid Institute survey showed that 23 percent of Canadians suffer from extreme social isolation and loneliness.

- 33% of Canadians say they're not sure they could count on anyone for emergency financial help.
- 18% of Canadians say they're not certain they could lean on anyone during a personal crisis.
- 45% of Canadians say they haven't interacted socially with a neighbour in the last month.
- 38% of Canadians with a physical disability struggle with social isolation and loneliness.

A 2018 report by the Vancouver Foundation found that nearly a third of 18- to 24-year-olds across the region experience loneliness "almost always" or "often."

And according to a 2019 survey of almost 8,000 British Columbians by the Vancouver Foundation, the youngest and oldest generations yearn the most for community connections.

“Social isolation and loneliness are one of the biggest challenges of our time,” says Ray Pennings, executive vice president of Cardus.

“They're a symptom of our culture's obsession with personal autonomy, leaving us living life as 'I' instead of 'we.'

[And] we reap poorer financial, mental, and physical health associated with isolation and loneliness, making us more vulnerable to addiction, depression, suicide, and the debt spiral.

Alone. Even in places where people gather.

But in this archetypal story at Jacob's Well - we also see light – the light of possibility:

Just in the chapter before, Jesus is in conversation with Nicodemus and you would think that Jesus would find more commonality with a Jewish Pharisee. But we all know how that went.

And so by contrast, Jesus Encounters a Samaritan woman AND it is a meeting of minds and hearts.

- Jesus embodies wisdom, he sees this woman for who she is.
- He talks literally about water, figuratively about water, about Christ about anointing, about change, about spiritual hunger, and about transformation.
- She tracks with him! She is not intimidated by him. She catches every nuance, every meaning exactly.
- They go higher and deeper in sync with each other.
- It is an encounter of such mutuality that Jesus reveals his true identity for the first time in this Gospel according to John.

Mystical writer Bruno Barnhart in a book called *Second Simplicity: The inner shape of Christianity* writes:

“The knowledge of Jesus Christ is a unitive knowledge, it is the luminosity of my own true and eternal being.” In Christ's light, we see light.

Jesus Christ standing before the Samaritan woman becomes the mirror in which she sees not only the face of God but her true face.

It's like the surprise of Carol phoning me at 5 am and seeing me clearly.
And the thawing of her social deepfreeze.

Encounters of Christ in our very midst.