

## A Story of Power

March 12, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: John 4: 1-34, 39-42*

You cannot tell the story of injustice without telling the story of power. It requires integrity to become honest about how our power systems and our position in the world affect our capacity to do justice. Which is to say, justice can never be severed from mercy. The two sway and balance each other, as we move into the stories of our and others' wrongs.

Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh*, pp. 122-23

The gospel reading for today should perhaps be from later in John's gospel, chapter 20, verse 1: "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark", Mary woke up ... Although I strongly prefer waking up *after* the sun rises, I love Daylight Savings Time. We may be a bit off-balance now, but tonight, as we enjoy our extra hour of evening daylight, we'll be happy.

This time of the year intensifies our semi-annual debate about whether Daylight Savings Time is a good thing or a bad thing. I'm not sure why there seems to be so much chatter about how "everyone" dislikes changing twice a year to and from DST, and how we should make one or the other permanent. I don't know about you, but I'm totally fine with the semi-annual ritual of clock-changing. I'd like more daylight, but to state what should be obvious, no matter how we set our clocks, the amount of daylight on a specific date in a specific place is not going to change. If we change our clocks for more evening light, the mornings will be darker. Sometimes I think it's difficulty with change than anything else.

Now, although this discussion about how to best deal with the dilemma of darkness in the north is well-intentioned, it is not new. Doesn't it sound familiar to you? (That is, you of a certain age.) It was late in 1973, in the midst of what we called "The Energy Crisis." In an effort to reduce the collective amount of energy we consumed, we would have year-round daylight savings time for at least two years, and then decide from there whether it would be permanent. It would begin four weeks after the legislation was signed. The vote in Congress was 311-88, and 67-10 in the Senate. The President signed it. Polls show that 79% of Americans approved. We changed our clocks on Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 1974.

Then on Monday morning, we all woke up in the dark. School children, myself included, waited at school bus stops in the pitch-black darkness, or walked the mile to school in the dark long before we had reflective tape on our backpacks. I remember watching the sun rise from our classroom ... a few minutes before 9am ... during 2<sup>nd</sup> period. By the end of January, public support for this experiment had plummeted, and it was repealed in October so that we didn't have to go through it another winter.

Those of us who remember the early 70s are now fifty years older. I wonder how many people now working for permanent DST remember what it was really like? As a Harvard Philosophy professor famously remarked in 1905, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>1</sup>

We of a certain age may also remember other things from the 40s and 50s and 60s, such as the direct benefits of FDR and Frances Perkins' government programs in the late 40s and 50s, or a time when one parent working a regular job could support a family of 4 or 5 or 6 people, or the Clean Air and Water legislation of the 70s that transformed smog-filled cities into blue skies. It wasn't all rosy, of course. We also remember policies of segregation and discrimination. There was poverty and exploitation. Times change. People change. Opinions change. There is always work to do as we seek to build a more just society.

But there's even more work to do if and when we are drawn back to re-view and re-discuss and re-litigate the things that we thought we had already decided for the best. This is what I heard yesterday at a community gathering, listening to

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<sup>1</sup> George Santayana, 1905

a woman who is running for the School Committee in our town. There is an active, organized attempt to disrupt the steady change that has led to greater opportunities: more equality, more attention to the impact of our policies on the environment, more equity, more respect for people's differences, more inclusion. Some disruption can be good. Some proposals and new ideas are improvements. How do we know when a rule or a proposal or a change is a good thing? How do we evaluate the consequences of our policies or laws or judicial decisions? Or is that even the right question? Can we work together for the common good? Or is that just a myth? Is the goal to use our influence to demand that everyone be treated fairly? It seems that we have very different ideas of what it means to be in charge, to lead, to make the rules, to hold power. We've painted ourselves into two distinct camps who only seem to know how to oppose each other. But that's not exactly new.

The story of the Woman at the Well wouldn't be the same story if it hadn't happened in the context of Jesus venturing into foreign territory. John tells the story of Jesus' encounter with the Woman at the Well quite early in his gospel, when Jesus was just starting out in his ministry. Chapter 1 begins with its rather cryptic, though poetic prologue: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Then we read about John baptizing out in the wilderness. The next day, they go to Galilee, where a few more disciples joined them. Then to a wedding in Cana, where his mother coaxes a reluctant Jesus to change water into wine. At the Temple, an angry Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers. By chapter 3, which we read last week, we have Nicodemus, lots of questions and confusion. Then they're headed back to Galilee.

I've read these stories since I was a child, but I've never been to that part of the world, so I looked it up. It's the same distance from Jerusalem to Galilee as it is from Dartmouth (near New Bedford) Massachusetts to Manchester, New Hampshire. At 111 miles, it's not a distance I can imagine walking, but they did. However, like them, when I drive to NH, I have to make a decision about whether to take 495 – a longer distance, but less hassle – or whether I go straight north through Boston. Jesus and his disciples could have gone around -- travelled along the Jordan River, to the east -- or taken the more direct route through the hills of Samaria. Even though it was Samaria. Today, many call that area north of Jerusalem and west of the Jordan River the West Bank; it's a bit bigger than Rhode Island. Then, as now, the gospel writer reports that the people of Samaria were not necessarily welcoming to the Jewish travelers. That's an understatement. Some say that there was a longstanding hatred between the two. The jockeying for power and land and resources is an age-old story. Some things don't change with time.

In our gospel story, after a long northward journey through the potentially hostile territory of Samaria, Jesus and the disciples came to the edge of a city. The disciples went ahead to buy food, and Jesus sat down by an ancient well. He was hot, dusty, tired, alone, and (since his companions had gone ahead, presumably with their travel gear) he didn't even have what he needed to fetch a drink for himself. The women who came each day to get their day's supply of water would usually do so in the early morning coolness, when they would also see and talk with each other. But at this hour of the day, the well was deserted. Until Jesus saw that there was one lone person coming, one who had perhaps been thinking that she wouldn't have to see anyone else there.

A first-century observer to this situation would not expect Jesus to have anything to do with her ... a Samaritan, and a Samaritan woman at that. Yet, Jesus opens the conversation, and asks for her assistance: "Give me a drink." The woman immediately names the disconnect: "How is it that a Jewish man is even speaking to a Samaritan woman?" Jesus' response is as puzzling as his prior conversations about being born again, or gifts of heaven, or eternal life. He tells her that he has living water that will relieve her thirst once and for all.

This is not normal community well-side conversation. But it's interesting. Because the turning point in their conversation, the point that allows further conversation to take place, is the woman's response to Jesus' statement. She could have so easily responded, "What are you talking about?" Or "You're sounding crazy. Are you dehydrated? Is the heat getting to you?" Had she responded that way, their conversation would likely have come to a dead end, and Jesus would have moved on in his travels, with the realization that yet another person didn't understand the message he came to bring. We all know what it feels like when no one seems to understand us. We feel excited about something, but others don't share our interest. Or passionate ... but others don't seem to care. No one seems to understand Jesus, and we're four chapters in.

The woman's answer is not one of misunderstanding, for she appears to know just what Jesus is offering and asks him for some of his living water. The woman empowers Jesus at this vulnerable beginning point in his ministry. First, she allows him to admit his need to share this "living water". Second, she calls on him to name his identity. "Sir, I see that you are a

prophet.” In fact, this is the first, and one of the few instances where Jesus says directly, “I am the Messiah.” And so, in the middle of this unfamiliar place, Jesus is empowered for his ministry -- restored to the community to which he is called, and begins to heal, to feed, and to preach and teach.

Likewise, Jesus ministers to the woman in the same three ways. Ignoring their societies’ prohibitions against speaking or interacting with each other, he listens to her as a person, encourages her to see herself clearly, and restores her to her community. Without her openness to him and her honesty, he would not have made his revelation to her, nor does it appear that she would have heard it or understood its meaning. What I find so compelling about this story is its mutuality: he connects with her, she empowers him, and they are both the better for it. Cole Arthur Riley writes “In mutuality, belonging is both a gift received and a gift given.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus and the woman found a sense of belonging in their brief, but transformative moment.

So, here’s my question: did the people who encountered Jesus – his healing, his teaching, his feeding their bodies and their souls – did they see him as a replacement for those who held power in their world? Was he to be their new ruler? Their king? Their governor? In other words, were they seeking to keep the system the same, but just change around the players? Or did Jesus bring a new way of understanding community and power? In a world of rich and poor, landowner and field worker, haves and have-nots, enslavers and enslaved, Jesus calls us to change the whole system. And that’s not easy to hear, or to do. Especially for those of us who have benefitted in some ways from that system and the ways it allocates resources. It is nearly impossible to address the power imbalance when you’re balancing on power yourself.

What exactly is power? Power can be defined as control or dominance. Its synonyms are authority, law, jurisdiction, prestige and privilege, strength and domination. Or it can be defined as physical capacity, energy, or force, ability or potential, or a skill or talent (think “superpowers”). If you look at a system and some have power, and some do not, then that power is power over another. It is the power of dominance.

If we were to design a political system, would we want a society where some have power over others? Where one has resources, and another does not? Where some have more than plenty while others starve? If we were starting from scratch, we might not build it that way, but it is what we have inherited. And it is our life’s work to find the best ways to improve it. But remember: if people don’t like to change their clocks, they certainly won’t like more major change.

Over these past few years, as we’ve been learning more about our American system of enslavement, about the colonization of these lands, it’s become clearer to me that we can’t just address one aspect of discrimination without looking critically at the whole system. Declaring that enslaved people were free didn’t complete the work of changing the plantation system or the industrial factory system that requires some to be perpetually subservient to others, either directly or economically. To paraphrase Cole Arthur Riley, true justice protects and affirms dignity for all, not just for some.<sup>3</sup> Or to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln: once you give up the principle that everyone matters, then democracy fails.<sup>4</sup> The power we’re talking about is the strength of mutuality and empowerment that grows and expands, welcomes and renews us all. It is not a zero-sum game, where giving power to one person removes it from someone else. And it’s not like daylight, where if you add an hour of evening light, you have to take it from the morning. It is a different power ... the power of human love.

John reports that the woman left her water jar (which was her reason for coming to the well in the first place) and went back to the city, bearing witness to what she had seen and heard. The message that Jesus gave her changed her – she was compelled to share it with the people around her, perhaps the same people she had been avoiding at the early-morning gatherings at the well. The woman became an evangelist. Or in today’s language, an influencer ... because of what she said, many believed in Jesus. Based on her recommendation, many listened to him themselves, and came to believe that he was the Savior of the world. Jesus broke the rules of the day, upending power. He empowered her, and she empowered him.

As they listened to her witness and as they heard him for themselves, many more decided to follow Jesus. As the sun rises again for a new day, may we too, find the courage to challenge and change our systems of power until they bear true justice for all. Amen!

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<sup>2</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh*, pp. 72-73

<sup>3</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh*, p. 123

<sup>4</sup> in Heather Cox Richardson, *Letters from an American*, <https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/march-10-2023>