

## IN NO POSITION TO HELP

Lent 3: Shaped by thirst

*John 4:5-42*

Helping is a complicated thing

Well, on the *one* hand, it's incredibly simple.

As simple as seeing a human need in the course of your day,  
and if you're in a position to help,  
just reaching out to help, and going your way.

It's as simple as the human impulse  
to be decent and attentive to those around you.

There's an insurance commercial that shows a whole sequence  
of scenes of one person helping another,  
while a third person notices, gets inspired,  
and helps out someone else moments later,  
and it keeps going on that way.

It's one of those rare commercials  
that inspire goodwill in the human spirit  
even *more* than selling their product,  
although they do *that* too.

Helping another person is something that is  
simply decent, simply good, simply responsible, simply human.

It can also get very complicated,  
if you are in a position to help.

I use that phrase, "in a position to help"  
because so much of the helping that goes on in society  
is determined almost exclusively by the position  
of the helper and help-ee.

In fact, many are in the position of being a "professional helper,"  
including me.

Before becoming a pastor, I was a social worker,  
because I *literally*, wanted to help people.

I worked with older persons,  
helping provide services to enable them to live at home.

I was able to help in those situations,

not just because it was a good, human thing to do,  
but because I was put in a *position* to help.

I was given access to resources—  
government funds were given to the non-profit agency I worked for.  
The agency paid me a salary to do my job full-time;  
provided a desk, phone, and office supplies;  
reimbursed mileage traveling into remote rural areas;  
even, upon my request, gave me the resources  
to establish a branch office in a rural town  
so I could be more accessible to those I was helping.  
I was in a great position to help, and help I did.

Of course, my helping had parameters. The one being helped  
had to be poor enough,  
and had to be impaired enough,  
and had to want help enough.  
So while I was in this enviable "position to help"  
it reinforced their *un*-enviable "position of need."

Even I—a low-paid, 24-year-old, guy in jeans and a beat-up car,  
working for a community non-profit—  
I had the status, the resources, the training,  
and the power to give and withhold help,  
at *my* discretion.  
And those getting the help just had to suck it up,  
and permit the indignities involved  
in having a guy with a clipboard  
sitting in their living room or beside their bed,  
asking them how much they made each month in social security,  
and how much money was in their bank account,  
and whether they could go to the bathroom by themselves.

In retrospect, I think I did a lot of people of lot of good,  
through the social services I could put into motion.  
My helping *did*, in fact, enable some people  
to live longer and happier and safer in their own homes.  
I'm proud of what I did.

But it was complicated by this factor  
of what it means to be in a position to help.  
My helping reinforced my position of power,  
and it reinforced their position of powerlessness.

Actually, I was able to be a real friend to some of my clients.  
I spent hours sometimes, listening to their life stories.  
Sometimes they even asked about mine.  
But neither of us ever completely lost sight of the fact  
that *I* still had the position of power.  
I could, at *any* time, determine that they no longer qualified  
for the help I was sending their way.

*This* kind of helping is a lot more complicated,  
than holding open the door at the post office  
for someone tapping a white cane on the sidewalk.

Helping due to our position, happens all the time.  
That's not bad, that's good.  
But it's also complicated.  
It's a good kind of helping that we, frankly, need a lot *more* of.

It's the kind of helping that the church does 99% of the time—  
whether it's evangelistic mission work,  
or international development,  
or local community service.  
And it's precisely the kind of help we will be doing this next week,  
as we open our church doors to host the HARTS shelter.  
We are in an obvious, and enviable, position to help.  
We have the compassionate people, the financial resources,  
the food, the heated shelter, the showers, the beds.  
We already have  
pretty much everything our homeless neighbors *need*,  
to live for a week in greater safety, security, and health.  
So we have, I believe, a God-given responsibility to help.  
And I am so grateful we have stepped up to the task,  
and are *doing* it.  
Kudos to Shirley, and Barbara, and the dozens and dozens  
of volunteers who will be happily helping this week.

But because we are in this position, it's complicated.  
To meet certain regulations,  
to meet a certain standard of human fairness,  
to ensure that *our* people are reasonably protected,  
and to keep from running out of the financial resources  
we released for this act of helping,  
we—and I say *we*, because HARTS is *us*—  
we need to limit the number of homeless people we help.  
Some get turned away.  
There has been an emergency overflow shelter to take these,  
but that option closes this Friday.  
After that, we don't know *what's* going to happen  
with the homeless for whom there is no room in the inn.  
Those of us “in a position to help” are talking about it now.  
But it's complicated.

I could repeat my point with all kinds of examples  
of the complicated nature of helping,  
when we are in a position to help.  
For instance,  
helping Christian Baptist Church  
in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans,  
is pretty complicated.  
There's been some movement recently,  
and we hope to keep moving forward.  
And the emergency financial assistance we give  
to People Helping People, or on occasion,  
directly to the person in need.  
When to say yes, when to say no, when to say,  
“yes, but only *if* you do such-and-such.”  
Tough questions.  
And the money and resources we share with our sister churches  
in the Global South.  
Mennonite World Conference has a Global Sharing Fund,  
in which we participate.  
We have *our* program to help churches in developing countries  
with the funds to finish constructing their church building.  
*Wonderful* things to do.  
But *oh*, the relationship dynamics that puts into motion!

How do *we*, in a position of  
higher status and privilege and resources,  
help without creating dependence,  
or being too protective, or conditional, or stingy.  
We *must* help, and we *do*, and it's good.  
But it's complicated.

Because “positional helping”—to coin a phrase—  
can never be pure and simple.  
Help from top down is always, in some form or another,  
exchanged for something else.  
On *rare* occasions, it's actual material or money  
to be paid back at some future date.  
*More* often, it's the intangible benefits we get from helping—  
the psychological benefit we gain from being charitable,  
sometimes public recognition for our generosity,  
sometimes it simply reinforces our position,  
ensures that our respective roles—as helper and help-ee—  
won't ever get turned around.  
Sometimes, *happily*,  
the act of helping comes back to us in ways that enrich us,  
we learn, simply by being with those who are suffering.  
Our homeless guests through HARTS this week  
will, in many ways, be our teachers.  
We have a chance to learn from their lives.  
Is that *good*? Of course! Obviously!  
But is it *complicated*? Yes, that *too*.

Whenever we are called to help another,  
it would be good to at least reflect on what this act of helping  
is doing—for us, for the one we are helping,  
and for our relationship with them.  
We could at least consider how we might turn the tables sometimes,  
and learn to be gracious recipients of help from others,  
learn how to be needy.

And for that we turn to today's amazing Gospel story  
of Jesus and the Samaritan woman—from John chapter 4.

Jesus, we all know, was the consummate helper.  
Everywhere he went, he helped.  
Healed, fed, restored, forgave, delivered.  
But in this story, it was Jesus who needed help.  
He was hot, tired, and thirsty.  
That fact *alone* is worth pondering.  
We don't often think of Jesus in terms of his  
very real, very physical, and very human needs.  
When Jesus and his disciples got into Samaria,  
the disciples went on into the city to buy food.  
Jesus stayed by the well.  
*Why?*  
Because he heard God telling him  
he had some spiritual business to do  
with a Samaritan woman who'd be coming along shortly?  
That's *possible*, I suppose.  
But I think the reason was more earthy and human.  
Jesus stayed by the well because he was exhausted.  
John tells us in v. 6 that Jesus was “tired out by his journey.”  
  
He was probably huffing and puffing, and a little wobbly on his feet.  
So he said to his disciples,  
“*You* go get the food. I can't take another step.”  
Not to be irreverent, Jesus may not have been in as good a shape  
as his brawny fisherman-disciples from Galilee.  
So he stayed by the well.  
Alone. Hot. Tired.  
And no bucket.

So when the Samaritan woman came along,  
I *doubt* Jesus was thinking,  
“Ah . . . an opportunity to teach a valuable spiritual lesson.”  
He was thinking,  
“Ah . . . someone with a bucket.”  
Out of his pure physical need, he asked,  
“Will you give me a drink?”  
Simple, straightforward. “Will you give me a drink?”

Except, it wasn't simple at all, and Jesus knew it.

Self-respecting Jews would never be caught in Samaria at *all*.  
Samaritans were worse than heathens.

They were half-breed Jews gone bad.  
Who didn't follow the law of Moses.

Good Jews would have gone *far* out of their way  
to avoid getting anywhere *close* to the spot  
where Jesus purposely put himself.

Not only did Jesus and his disciples go directly through Samaria,  
Jesus stopped at the only well near the city,  
a place where he *knew* he would be bound to have  
a personal encounter with someone from the town,  
and *that*, most likely a woman.  
Shameful, beyond *belief*, for any good Jewish man.  
Jesus *knew* this  
But . . . he needed help.  
He was exhausted and needed water.

So here sits Jesus, the famed master healer,  
who turns water into wine  
and a lunch basket into a feast for thousands.  
Here sits Jesus, the constant helper,  
Jesus, the one with all the power of God at his disposal,  
and he turns the position of helper and help-ee upside down.  
With one little question,  
he changes the whole social landscape.

Rather than offer help from a position of power,  
he asked for help from someone  
who was in no position to help . . . *literally*.

Sure, she has a bucket and was able.  
But in every other way *imaginable*,  
she was in no position to be the helper.  
She was a despised Samaritan.  
She was a woman in a male-dominated culture.  
She was even on the outs with her own Samaritan townspeople.  
She was in no position to so much as *approach* a man,  
much less have a social interchange.

This was the woman,  
to whom Jesus let his human vulnerability *show*.  
He made no pretense.  
Plain and simple, he needed her.  
He asked her to be so kind as to reach out to *him*  
and meet his need.

His act of vulnerability was *so* remarkable  
that it stunned the Samaritan woman,  
and it rendered Jesus' disciples speechless.  
They literally didn't know what to say, John tells us, v. 27

Of course, we find out in the rest of the Gospels,  
as Jesus' story plays itself out,  
that Jesus made it a regular practice  
to shift the social landscape,  
to take the expected order of things,  
and turn them around, end-for-end.  
"Blessed are those who mourn."  
"Love your enemies."  
"The first will be last and the last will be first."  
"Those who save their lives will lose it."  
The Master that washed the feet of his disciples.  
The busy rabbi that paused mid-lesson to talk to children.

So there sat Jesus, allowing himself to be ministered to  
by a Samaritan woman.

And here we sit,  
wanting to help, but *not* wanting to risk too much,  
needing to guard the realities of our position.

There is no easy answer here,  
as to how we be truly Christ-like in our helping  
and in our being helped.

But maybe the lesson to take from this story,  
is that whether we're the ones in need,  
or whether others are in need,

*that* is not the time to act purely out of our position.  
Rather, it's the time to remember the Jesus way,  
the upside-down kingdom of God way,  
of not even noticing position,  
but noticing the humanity we share.

Letting go of the need to protect our position  
unleashes all kinds of possibilities.  
In the story of Jesus and the woman,  
when Jesus ignored position and allowed himself to be vulnerable,  
he not only got his need met,  
he then was able to help his helper in an even deeper way,  
and in turn, to help the whole town.

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We have lots of thirsty people among us here today.  
People longing for something they need,  
but cannot access. No bucket.  
I *know* that's the case, because I've heard some of you say it.  
I know it, because it's my own story.  
I thirst. Often. And repeatedly.  
I know how hard it is to ask someone *else* for a drink.  
It's easier to make demands of God, or of others,  
the way the *Israelites* demanded water from Moses,  
in today's Exodus reading.  
It's harder to do as Jesus did,  
and put myself in a vulnerable position,  
especially in front of those who usually look to *me* for help.

I know I'm not alone in this.  
There are thirsty people here today,  
who need a drink  
but haven't yet summoned the courage to say,  
"Will you help me . . . and give me a drink?"  
Much *less*, have they turned to a Samaritan,  
to someone they least expect to be able to help.

So this morning, in just a symbolic way,  
we're going to practice asking for help.

If you are exhausted, or thirsty in any way,  
and long to be refreshed by some cool water . . .  
come and wait by the well,  
represented here on the front table by these pitchers.

You'll notice that the water at this well, like the one in Samaria,  
is not very accessible. No cups to drink from.  
Jesus took a risk when he sat by the well and waited.  
You *also* will need to take a risk.  
You'll need to come to where the water is, and just wait,  
not knowing *who* might help, or *when*.

Others will need to play the role of the Samaritan helper.  
Maybe you see that someone is asking for water,  
and you are willing to help.  
So get a cup from the small table on either side,  
and go to the one waiting,  
pour water into the cup,  
and offer it in Jesus' name.

You don't need to even know the person who's waiting.  
Jesus and the woman were strangers before they met at the well.  
So let the help come from someone they least expect to help.  
Children, youth,  
this would be a great opportunity for you to step forward.  
You might not think of yourselves as persons who can help adults,  
and some adults may not think children are in a position to help.  
Today, you can show them differently.  
So I *especially* encourage children and youth,  
or even young children with their parents,  
to be free to take the cup and offer water to those who thirst.

Or any adults, of course, are welcome to help.  
Especially if you think the person waiting  
is not likely to expect you to be the one to help.  
By serving them water you are giving them, symbolically,  
the kind of experience Jesus had at the well.

All are welcome to come, while the rest of us sing.

No matter what the source of your thirst, come to the well.

Whenever you are ready.

If there several people waiting at the well,  
and the one you went for has already been served,  
give the water to someone else.

So here we sit at the community well today.

Come and be refreshed by the cool water of God's spirit,  
carried by God's people.

While you are coming,

the rest of us will be singing the songs listed in the bulletin,  
beginning with STJ 59, Come and fill our hearts with your love.

—*Phil Kniss, March 27, 2011*