

“That’s Why We’re Here”<sup>1</sup>

A few weeks ago, dear friends from Richmond, Steven and Barbara, sent me a card my birthday. They have a mischievous sense of humor upon which I can always rely. The card they sent had a vicar sitting with one of his female parishioners at tea. The vicar asks her, “Have you given much thought to the hereafter?” She responds, “Oh yes, I do it all the time. Wherever I am—upstairs, in the kitchen or in the basement I ask myself, ‘Now what am I here after?’”

It is one of the facts of life that in the midst of doing one thing we get distracted and find we cannot remember our initial intentions. So it seems to go today with Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. It is about noon. Jesus and his disciples have been walking from Judea to Galilee. When they approach the historic site of Jacob’s well, Jesus decides to sit and rest while the disciples go to a nearby village to get food and beverages.

As he rests a woman from a nearby village comes to lower her water bucket into the deep well in order to draw up some water. Jesus, not having a bucket to draw water, asks the woman for a drink. What comes after that is the longest discussion that Jesus has with any one person in all of the Gospels. It is extraordinary because the discussion is not with a Pharisee, Priest, Scribe, or member of the Sanhedrin. The discussion is with a woman, a woman without a name, and to top it off a woman of Samaria. Samaritans and Jews were neighbors, but there was a religious rift that led to distrust and sometimes enmity between them.

If those facts were not enough to make this an extraordinary encounter, the Samaritan woman does not receive a lecture from Jesus. Rather she engages him in a discussion of theology and religious practice the depth of which no other figure in the Gospels, male or female, dares to or is able to do. They discuss the importance of their competing holy mountains and temples. They discuss matters of God’s chosen people, the difference between water and living water, and they also discuss her life. It is at that point that she drops her bucket and rushes back to her village to tell everyone that she has met the Messiah and he is sitting at their well.

But they were each there to get some water and neither of them did. They are so distracted by their discussion that Jesus never gets his drink of water, and the woman never fills her bucket. We should be thankful for that little bit of forgetfulness, or they would not have had the conversation and we would not have had the advantage of eavesdropping on it. But there are other kinds of forgetfulness that are not to anyone’s advantage.

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to James Taylor for his song “That’s Why I’m Here”

On Friday I was talking with someone about the state of his health. He was worried that once the provisions they had at home started to run low there would be no way to get restocked. Six feet of social distance might be easy enough for the healthy, but those who are ill, frail, or who have a compromised immune system might not feel it is safe to be out amongst people, even for a short trip to the grocery store.

As I was having this conversation, an email popped up in my inbox. The email was from a wonderful and caring person informing me that she was willing and able to shop for and deliver food to anyone who had a need. Whether it was the Holy Spirit or just a coincidence here was the answer to my caller's concern.

When others, if not most of us, are wondering how we are going to take care of ourselves, or moaning about the inconvenience of school closures, sports cancellations, and the difficulty of travel, this woman was thinking about others. What is especially important is she was thinking about those who get forgotten; those who, because they are out of sight are out of mind.

I expect that others of us would have eventually gotten around to wondering about our neighbor who lives alone, the older couple who, live around the block, or our church friend who lives isolated miles from town. But this woman without any prodding from the government, the CDC, or the Church immediately offered her services not only to our parish, but to anyone who connected with her on Facebook.

There are times for deep theological discussions and discussions about the "hereafter," but in times of crisis it is those who run toward the sound of trouble and who think first about others instead of themselves who are the heroes. They are the ones who are doing God's work in the world so that no one is thirsty, hungry, or forgotten. We need to follow their lead. It is in community that God calls us to live serving each other. As Jesus said, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me."<sup>2</sup> When we serve the least of these—the hungry, thirsty, lonely, or isolated—we are serving Christ. There is no holier calling than this in all the whole wide world.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:40 NRSV