

Sermon for March 26, 2017 – “Tilting at Windmills”

Westwood First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Jeff Colarossi

Fourth (Third) Sunday of Lent, Year A – Text: John 4:5-42

Have you ever tried to do something, and been told that it was impossible? Maybe you were trying to change something and people said, “You can’t do that. “We’ve never done it that way before. “It’s always been done this way!” Maybe you saw something wrong happening and tried to make it right. Whatever your quest, if you’re up against seemingly insurmountable odds, people say you’re “tilting at windmills.” Or along those lines they call your endeavor “quixotic”, a way of saying you’re crazy for even trying. These colorful expressions have become part of our language. They come, of course, from Miguel de Cervantes’ novel, “Don Quixote”. Which was made it into the musical, “The Man of La Mancha”.

When I was much younger, my parents took me to see Richard Kiley in the role that he originated on Broadway. One of the “crazy” things Don Quixote did was to fall in love with a local prostitute, Aldonza. He treats her like a lady, and calls her Dulcinea, or “Sweet One.” Her reaction: “Are you crazy? I’m a whore!” Everyone laughs at the foolish old knight, as he follows his quest, His “impossible dream.” Now, if someone called me Don Quixote, I’d take it as a compliment. I say that because, as I see it Don Quixote has a lot in common with Jesus, someone who tilted at quite a few windmills in His time, too. Nowhere in the gospels is this better illustrated than in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well. We know all about the animosity – hatred, actually – between the Samaritans and Jews. We know that most Jews travelling between Judea and Galilee would rather walk around Samaria, an extra forty miles, just to avoid the feared and hated Samaritans. Not Jesus. And so it was here near the village of Sychar, at Jacob’s Well, that Jesus sat and rested while His disciples went into town for food. Upon their return, they found Jesus chatting with the Samaritan gal. This was a shocking defiance of Jewish custom on at least 3 counts because she was 1) a Samaritan, 2) a woman, and (to all appearances) 3) a notorious sinner. All this without mentioning the fact that she was discussing Torah with Jesus which women were forbidden to do. So, by engaging this Samaritan woman in conversation, Jesus tilted at several windmills and broke through several of the major barriers that divide humankind to this very day.

The **first** of these windmills He tilted at was racism. Because the Samaritans had intermarried with the invaders, the Jews considered them half-breeds and mongrels. They weren’t to be associated with. They were to be feared and despised. As we know, Jesus told a parable where a Samaritan was a good guy, but some people still didn’t get it. Some people still don’t even now.

The **second** windmill was that of fundamentalism, in a religious sense. The Samaritans worshipped God at Mt. Gerizim, not in the temple in Jerusalem. And, they only used the first five books of the Old Testament in their worship. They excluded the Psalms and the Prophetic books. For that reason, the Jews called them heretics and excommunicated them. They wouldn’t eat or drink with them, nor would they use a cup or bowl that’d been used by a Samaritan. But Jesus would, even going so far as to asking the woman for a drink from her cup. Jesus was all about inclusion. The whole concept of exclusion is completely foreign to Him. He told the Samaritan woman that the time was coming, a time when it wouldn’t matter where you worshipped God, or with what words. What matters, Jesus said, is to worship God “in Spirit and in truth.”

Truth is often defined differently by both individuals and denominations. But Jesus isn't talking about dogma or doctrine, where one stands on a given position, or even what style of worship one uses. No, what Jesus was talking about was **sincerity**. To worship in spirit and truth means that we're focused entirely on God. To worship in spirit and truth means that we're not just putting on a show. To worship in spirit and truth means we do so with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, with our very being, from who we are. Jesus made believers of many of the Samaritans in the town of Sychar, and He accepted them. He didn't ask them to worship differently. He didn't try to "convert" them to Judaism. He didn't demand they worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. He accepted them as they were, where they were, for who they were. In return, they accepted Him as the Messiah they'd been waiting for. A Messiah for Samaritans as well as for Jews. A Messiah for everyone...

The **third** windmill tilted at, the third barrier overcome by Jesus that day, was that of nationalism, or tribalism. The Jews hated the Samaritans, not only because they were half-breeds and heretics, but also because they were traitors. They'd collaborated with the enemy some 700 years earlier. Things like that aren't easily or quickly forgotten. And this kind of regional animosity isn't a thing of the past. Whether it's the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, the English- and French-speaking in Cameroon, Tribalism is still one of the death-dealing sins of which Jesus tried so hard to rid us. Yes, the Jews hated the Samaritans. But the feeling was mutual. The Samaritans built a temple on Mt. Gerizim in 400 BC, guess what happened to it? The Jews came and destroyed it. Is it any wonder that the Samaritan woman was astounded when Jesus, a Jewish man, asked her for a drink of water? John explained her reaction to his readers by saying "for Jews do not associate with Samaritans." But Jesus walked through this barrier as if it didn't exist, because in his mind, it didn't! When He looked at the woman He saw someone made in God's image. He saw someone with inherent worth, intrinsic value, and for that reason, she mattered to Him.

We can be racists and bigots, or we can be Christians. We cannot be both. As Paul wrote, **"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."**

A **fourth** barrier Jesus broke through was sexism or gender bias. When the disciples returned to the well and saw Jesus talking to the woman their reaction was surprise bordering on shock. They couldn't believe it. Back then, this kind of thing simply wasn't done. Women were second-class citizens. Men didn't talk to women in public certainly not without her husband around. But all this meant nothing to Jesus. Not only did He speak with them in public openly, He welcomed them into His inner circle of followers.

The **fifth** windmill at which Jesus tilted that day was judgmentalism. There's been much discussion about the Samaritan woman, about why it was exactly that she needed to come to the well in the hottest part of the day. Many presume that it was because she, much like Don Quixote's Dulcinea, was a prostitute which might very well have been the case. But many scholars now believe that it's because she was "barren", that she couldn't conceive and bear children at a time where women were valued for their childbearing abilities, and when husbands could divorce at a whim. For that reason, some say, she'd been dumped by one husband after another when they learned she wouldn't be having kids. So, people find out about this and being superstitious and closed-minded do two things. First, they assume she's sinned; she had to have, otherwise why would God smite her and cause her to be barren? The second thing is that they would've avoided her lest some of that rub off on them. In any case, this woman was a sinner – she had to be, and honestly, who hangs out with sinners? Well, Jesus.

Moral barriers meant nothing to Jesus who showed this woman the same respect He'd have shown His own mother. He treated this woman with the same dignity with which Don Quixote treated Aldonza. Jesus simply refused to single her out for condemnation. Actually, come to think about it, that's not entirely true. I mean, He **did** single her out. He singled her out to carry His message. To be His evangelist to all in her village. And don't you know, if there was one thing for which Jesus was continually getting in trouble with the Pharisees, it was hanging out with sinners. He ate and drank with tax collectors! He even called one as a disciple. He dined with Zacchaeus!! He let prostitutes anoint His feet with oil! Here He was again and revealing Himself as the Messiah, no less. So, considering this, how can we possibly be judgmental toward anyone? How can we be anything less than welcoming? I mean, shouldn't we set the moral standard bar a little higher? Seriously, might we want to remember that we're sinners too? That we're all in need of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. That we should we never ever feel superior to someone else?

Unfortunately, all the "isms" that Jesus confronts in our gospel reading this morning still exist today. Sadly, even among Christians. If this story teaches us anything it's that these "isms" are **not** in accord with the mind of Christ. Shouldn't we, then, be looking for ways to be rid of them? Make them a thing of the past? Not just in our homes but in our communities and churches? What's that...? An impossible dream you say? Tilting at windmills? A fool's errand? A quixotic quest? Maybe. But here's the thing, to those around them Don Quixote was a fool. His love for Aldonza was an impossible fantasy of a foolish old man. It was love wasted on an unworthy woman. But Quixote loved Aldonza with a pure unselfish love seeking nothing from her but to serve her. And when he died, Aldonza was at his side, weeping. She stood up for him having at last accepted his love for her. And after his death, she serenely announced: my name is Dulcinea. She'd been redeemed and purified his love. Just like the woman at the well was redeemed and purified by the unselfish, unmerited, sacrificial love of Christ. Just as we are! In his death, Don Quixote's quest to save the fair Dulcinea succeeded, meaning that through it she understood and accepted his love likewise through His death, Jesus triumphs in His quest to save us.

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing...Jesus didn't die because of a vengeful God. He didn't die because of the Jews or the Romans. Jesus died because of His love for us – all of us. And, through His meeting with the woman at the well, Jesus shows us just how high, how deep and how wide that love is. For all people, including sinners like us. **Especially** sinners like us!

My charge then is this. To break down some barriers of our own this Lent, to tilt at some windmills, to dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe, to bear with unbearable sorrow, to run where the brave dare not go. To fight for the right without question or pause, to be willing to march into hell for that heavenly cause. God is at our side. Therefore, no foe is unbeatable, no sorrow is unbearable, no dream is impossible.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.