
Relationships are Difficult

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Lent 3 – Year A

The title of today's sermon is "Relationships are Difficult."

I am going to look at how this topic plays out in today's gospel reading, but first, I would like to welcome the University Choir from Sewanee. I was a student at The University of the South from 1997–2001 and then the Lay Chaplain from 2001–2004.

My wife is from the class of 2007, my brother-in-law from the class of 2000, and my sister-in-law, Mary Elizabeth Benton, is currently a sophomore.

All Saints' Chapel is near and dear to my heart, and I am so thankful that the University Choir has made the Cathedral as part of your choir pilgrimage. Thank you.

And since you all are visiting, and the title of my sermon is "Relationships Are Difficult," it seems appropriate to begin this sermon describing the difficult relationship I had with my sophomore year roommate.

Jeremy and I were assigned to be Assistant Proctors in Tuckaway, and lived in Room 121.

Jeremy was a devout Roman Catholic from New England, and I was an Episcopalian from the hills of Tennessee. Ironically, we both were struggling with a call to the priesthood.

However, the first few weeks we lived together we fought like cats and dogs, and we tended to bring religion into the argument, which only made things worse.

One day we had a disagreement about something, and then that disagreement turned into another debate about the Protestant Reformation. In the midst of that fight, I took issue with all the icons he had hanging on his side of the room, and then he made a remark about The Episcopal Church's fascination with sex.

Anyhow, it got personal, I got mad, and then I decided to get vindictive. So, on my next trip down to the Winchester Walmart, I decided to go over to the section that carries art—"Walmart Art."

And I am ashamed to say, that I purchased a poster of the most airbrushed swimsuit model you have ever seen. I named her "the other Mary" and placed her prominently on my side of the room to balance out all of the icons of the Virgin Mary on his side of the room. You can only imagine his reaction to my Walmart acquisition!

The other Mary led to a few more weeks of fighting, and then we came to the realization Sewanee wouldn't let us get a new roommate, so we were going to have to make it work. And that meant learning how to navigate a difficult relationship.

What did we do? Well we had to stay in relationship. We had to learn about the other person. We had to go deeper.

Today, Jeremy is a Roman Catholic monk and priest in Italy, and of course, I am an Episcopal priest. I can't speak for him,

but I know that through the grace of God, our difficult relationship became a holy relationship for me. Jeremy became an important spiritual companion, and I wouldn't be where I am today without his presence.

We all have had the experience of being in a difficult relationship. For some, it is a relationship with your spouse or a significant other. For others, it is a difficult relationship with your parents or children. Or, perhaps you are in a difficult relationship with a friend or roommate. Whatever the case, we all know what it means to be in a difficult relationship.

The woman at the well knows something about this as well.

She has been married five times. The woman who knows something about difficult relationships, and in going to the well, she ends up having another difficult encounter.

Let's look at what happens.

Jesus is sitting by the well with no bucket. The woman approaches and Jesus does something unthinkable, he engages a Samaritan woman in conversation. "Give me a drink," he says.

"Why are you talking to me," she responds.

Listen to what he says: "Hey, if you knew who I was and what I was capable of doing, you would give me some water."

Then she looks at him and says, "Why did you come to the well without a bucket?"

Let's take a step back. I don't know about you Sewanee students, but the beginning of this conversation reminds me of talking to women in college. Jesus hasn't said but 10 words and he has already dug himself a huge hole, and he continues to dig as he talks about her previous relationships.

If you were watching this exchange at today's well (a bar in Buckhead or fraternity house at Sewanee), you would say this thing is going to crash and burn. But, Jesus is Jesus and he has a knack for getting himself out of the grave!

I meant that as a joke, but I also say it with some seriousness. We don't talk about Jesus digging himself out of the grave; we talk about him going through the grave. And that is an important distinction, because Jesus is going to show us that sometimes the most important thing in a difficult relationship is to go deeper.

You know something about the woman at the well. You know something about her because there are relationships in your life that are difficult. There are relationships you want to ignore and walk away from. And there are some relationships that you needed to walk away from.

There are difficult and painful things in your life that you don't want to examine.

Yet, what does Jesus do? Jesus keeps bringing the Samaritan woman back to those difficult places and relationships, calling her to dig deeper, calling her to acknowledge a deeper thirst.

Jesus wants you to see that sometimes the 'difficult' can be an invitation to the 'holy.' Yes, there are places in our lives where the difficult is really an invitation to the holy!

One of the last prayers in the marriage service is a prayer about making the way of the cross to be the way of life. At some point, all relationships encounter difficulty. Unfortunately, some relationships are so difficult and painful they will end in death...they end at the cross. But, others have the opportunity to allow that difficulty to take them through the cross to new place of being.

The way of the cross becomes the way of life for all relationships. It is there we realize that difficulty (and even loss) can be an invitation to holiness.