

Lent 3A
March 15, 2020
St. Thomas, Amenia

Today's readings can be found at this site:

http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Lent/ALent3_RCL.html

Henrietta, or “Henny” as she’d been known since childhood, was a force to be reckoned with. She was a matriarch and Senior Warden of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in the small Ohio town of Gallipolis, and in that role not a single person made it through a whole Sunday morning worship without a hug, a handshake, or, at a bare minimum, a winking smile. Henny prided herself on knowing *everyone* in our small town and being able to tell a story about her connection to that person at a moment’s notice. When Steven and I moved to Gallipolis and bought our home, she knew about it before we signed the first dotted line. The next time I saw her, she was giddy and couldn’t wait to tell me the story of its previous owners—also Episcopalians—and the fact that they were cousins of a previous rector of the parish, whose grandfather had also been a rector of the parish nearly a century ago. Connection meant everything to Henny.

So, when we discovered just a few months later that Henny and I were, in fact, distant cousins—oh, boy! She arrived the next Sunday with a self-published book of her own family’s genealogy as a gift to me. Toward the last third of the book, a sticky note marked a page where my father’s name showed that, yes, Henny and I were connected by blood. We were family. Her nephew walked into the parish hall that Sunday, and from across the room Henny shouted, “Tommy! Meet your cousin!”

Never before or since have I met someone so dedicated to finding the great equalizing and universalizing thread that weaves everyone and everything together. Her life’s passions were genealogy, preserving county records of burials, marriages, births, and wills, and publishing books about Civil War and World War I veterans who lived and worked in that little town. In her social and civic life, she looked for the ways people were connected to each other, finding commonalities often they didn’t even recognize, helping to bridge and build relationships between the unlikeliest of folks. It not only brought her joy, but it gave all of us context and connection that tied our shared stories together. Later, when the home we bought became a foster home, the children whom we loved and sheltered became part of the connection tapestry Henny was always weaving. Our two boys are part of the story of that town and that house. They are part of the story of our connection to everything and everyone.

There are, though, many ways that we humans have used ancestry and the stories of our lineage and connection as tools of isolation and tribalism. The creation of the system of Ahnenpaß, where people sought to officially record their “Aryan” lineage and

prove their worth as non-Jews, was by no stretch of the imagination a means of building universality, mutuality, or shared narrative. No, the connection to someone's past was a means of showing alleged superiority, justifying nationalism, and was part of setting the stage for the heinous evil of genocide. The racism of our own country created terms like "mulatto," "quadroon," and "octoroon" to ensure that white people could control just who could claim "whiteness" and all the privilege that came—no, *comes*—with it.

When Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, she's taken aback. Her tapestry warns of the dangerous differences between her and this Jewish man sitting at the well. It tells the story of two groups divided on theological grounds and of people who avoid, at great inconvenience, ever interacting with each other. This Samaritan woman's connection with her own story was—at least she thought—all about the ways she and Jesus are different, incompatible, and disconnected.

But Jesus' understanding of connection, of the story thread that weaves us all together, surpasses even that of Henny's. Jesus shows the woman at the well that to be connected to the Messiah is to be known more intimately than we would ever expect or imagine. I don't want to add to centuries of harsh, unfair, and unscholarly interpretation of this woman's story, but I think it is clear that having five husbands isn't a point of honor in her society. Yet, to be seen—really seen—by Jesus means that he sees the whole story of her life. And he responds to that story with neither pity nor disgust, but simply acknowledgement. This is who you are. You are fully known and you are fully loved. That is the story of grace known through Jesus. He sees who we really are—the good stuff we like and the uncomfortable, less-than-ideal stuff we might try to hide. And his response is, "Yes, all of it. I love it all. I embrace it all."

The novel coronavirus that has spread so rapidly in the last few months challenges our sense of connection. The practice of "social distancing" means that we won't even be physically present with one another today. But we have a choice about how we interpret it. On one hand, I have a responsibility to my family and those who are closest to me to keep them safe. I should, therefore, avoid contact with large crowds of people. The fewer folks we touch, the less likely it is that my children, my husband, or I will get sick. My connection to my immediate family and my desire to keep them safe drives me to isolation and separateness.

But Jesus' understanding of connection and mutuality means that I have a deeper connection with my *whole* community than I can fully understand. You and I are inseparably linked. I share just as deep a connection with the neighbor down the street who might attend the same meeting as me as I do my own family. We are bound by the divinity we share. A decision to adhere to a quarantine, to cancel social gatherings, to forego the Kiss of Peace during liturgy, or to cease physically gathering altogether for a time—they're all, in reality, about our Christian responsibility and connection to the

whole of humanity. We love and deeply respect the divine spark in each person enough to do whatever it takes to keep us all as safe as possible. Knowing, too, that whatever may come, the love of God in Christ sees the reality of our lives—the good and bad, the hope and fear, the connection and disconnection—and says, “Yes, all of it. I love it all.”