

Experience a voice unlike yours...

I am still holding fast to that Lenten practice. We all did a little of that Friday night in our first Lenten soup supper, and we'll continue that this week in our Lenten program this coming Friday night.

I experienced voices different from mine yesterday in a disappointing way and also a hopeful way. We had another North Central Region Convocation at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford. As a North Central Leadership team, we had worked hard to plan the gathering, knowing we needed to have a fun ingredient while still trying to connect folks in our region to others doing like ministries.

We had a plan in mind as we tried to navigate through the waters of this new region structure for us all. God was up to something new. We had hoped for a large group to re-gather, for there was enormous energy in our gathering in November at Annual Convention. Only 24 or so came on Saturday, and that was the disappointment. The first half of our morning went as planned, and then the gathered group wanted us to hear their voices. This is where the hope arrived. As a leadership team we needed to hear and more importantly listen to the voices of those who cared enough to come yesterday. Our time together turned out to be what it needed to be and different from what we had envisioned. We had to

experience that—to experience a slight derailment that brought new life and hope to our work. We also gained 4 new members to the North Central Leadership team!

Yesterday afternoon I had another opportunity to experience voices unlike my own as I celebrated at *Mass on the Grass*. I arrived early and had a chance to mingle with the gathered guests very different from those I had spent the morning with in West Hartford. I learned about a young mother with three children who had just gotten her own apartment. The Friendship Center in New Britain is the gathering place for *Mass on the Grass*—a place that houses individuals and families until they can find housing of their own,

A man who had just arrived in New Britain from Waterbury was asking where he could find resources, like clothes. He was pointed to the Lutheran Church a few blocks away. This man did not ask for money, rather he was seeking community and clothing. He had tried to help someone in Waterbury, and that person stole from him, leaving him with relatively nothing. His caseworker recommended he go to New Britain and start over. *Mass on the Grass* is a different kind of worship where people do actively participate, and children make noise, and ambulances flash by just a few feet from us, and a man makes bird calls, and people are grateful for food at the Table and food in a plastic bag. In the somewhat chaotic worship, Jesus is in the midst of the voices, and those gathered yearn for Jesus in their lives.

In the story of the Samaritan woman Jesus teaches profoundly of the need to

experience voices unlike our own. Jesus was willing to ask for water and be in conversation with this woman who was not only a Samaritan and also had been married multiple times. She has a somewhat shameful past. With this uniqueness, she is very much an outsider—a social outsider as a woman, divorced, excluded, and some would say a nobody. She has no name in the story. People would probably cross to the other side of the road rather than to come close to her.

Jesus spends time with her. Jesus teaches her about living water. He listens to her and tells her parts of her own story. She listens to him without shame or fear. He doesn't make light of who she is, nor does he chastise her for who she is. He accepts her as someone new to faith and has compassion for her. Jesus shows the woman that God is up to something new. She is transformed by the experience and goes back to the town to tell her friends and neighbors about Jesus. She was an outsider and now is a member of the family of God, welcomed and accepted by Jesus.

We're reminded today of our call to accept and to listen and to experience those unlike us. Those early disciples asked Jesus, "Why are you speaking with her?" (John 4:27b). Jesus shows them and us that we are called to open ourselves to those still at the well today. There are still outsiders who feel rejected or excluded because of race, gender, ethnicity, marital status and the myriad of other things the world uses to separate us. In Jesus those divisions cease, and we experience the thirst we all have for living water. There is nothing that separates us

from the love of God in Jesus. The woman at the well came to experience that.

You and I are called to go and tell that story of her transformation and to look for how God is doing something new in us. Our voices are to welcome and accept and love. That's the good news for us to spread!