

Deacon Dan's homily for Sunday, March 15, 2020

"The Samaritan Woman at the Well: Well Water vs. Living Water"

The Church places the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well as our 3rd Sunday of Lent precisely at this time of preparation and reflection to more thoughtfully consider our relationship with Jesus the Christ and our response to His presence.

Today, we celebrate the first Scrutiny for the elect by the Parish community. Scrutiny may sound a little like someone is scrutinizing our friends who are coming into the Church, an interrogation or examination of some sort. Well, the three Scrutinies are intended to be an examination, but a self-examination to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective or sinful in the hearts of the Elect, in our hearts, too. This examination is also meant to bring out all that is good, strong and upright within us. So, as the Elect engage in today's First Scrutiny, let us both pray for them and scrutinize ourselves. So, how does John's Gospel help in this effort?

There are four lessons for us to understand and use:

1. God is relentless in His pursuit of us;
2. God invites us to enter into a close, intimate relationship with Him;
3. We have an intended response to this invitation; and
4. Once we have encountered God this way, we just can't hold onto this gift for ourselves.

In the story we just heard, what are the main actors and objects? Certainly, Jesus, the Samaritan woman, who remains unnamed, the Disciples and the townspeople. When an unnamed person is presented in Scripture, such as this woman, she is intended to represent a larger group. She represents the Church...us. The objects are only the water, the well or cistern it's called, and the water pot.

Jesus sits down at Jacob's Well outside the Samaritan capitol city of Sychar, at noon and he's tired and thirsty. Samaria is located between Jesus' home area around Galilee, in the north where He is returning, and Jerusalem to the south. Jews and Samaritans got along about as good as Giants and Dodger fans...well much worse, actually, as they really hated each other. Most good Jews, at this time, would have just gone around Samaria on their travels, avoiding any contact with them. However, Jesus goes right into that land, crossing all sorts of boundaries.

The woman comes to draw water from the well and finds Jesus already there. She comes alone, at mid-day. Why alone at the hottest part of the day? We later learn that she is a public sinner, an outcast, alone herself. Both, because of their tribal animosity and because men, socially, do not talk to women in public places, especially alone, when Jesus asks her for some water, she is shocked.

Knowing her life and her heart, Jesus turns the question of who gives water to who around by saying, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink, ' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

This scene shows us that Jesus is always there waiting for us to come, to recognize him, to ask him for what we really need to have happiness in our lives, life-giving water. God is relentless in his pursuit for us, always there ahead of us, waiting for us and inviting us to share in His love.

The woman has been coming to the well for years, perhaps, getting water, and yet, becoming thirsty again. That is the way for the water, the things of the world. The world cannot satisfy in any lasting way. We always become thirsty for something more, something greater, something more exciting. We all have something, some worldly desire that we come to the well for, which never fully satisfies, never quenches our thirst. What a share in the Divine life of Jesus which he offers is, "... whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." St. Augustine wrote, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

The second point, when this Gospel was written, a first-century Jew knew that meeting at a well had a special meaning. It meant marriage. Abraham sent his servant to get a wife for Isaac at a well (Genesis 24:11); Jacob met his love, Rachel, at a well (Genesis 29:2). And, Moses sitting at a well met his future wife, Zipporah (Exodus 2:16). Isaiah states, "Your builder shall marry you". The builder is God.

In this Gospel passage, the woman at the well represents the Church, the bride of Christ; we, the people of God, are the Church. There is no closer relationship than between two people in a marriage covenant. Jesus wants to enter into an intimate relationship with each one of us, as two people in a marriage.

Jesus knows us, as he knew the woman. He asks her to go and get her husband. And her reply is, "I do not have a husband." Correct, she has had five and is living with another man now.

Whenever we are in a close relationship with someone, and honest in our relationship, our wrinkles show through, our foibles become apparent to the other person, it is clear to the one who loves us, when we are going down a destructive path. And, out of love, that person will correct us, point out the destruction. Jesus did this, reading the words of Jesus in Scripture, going to confession, honest reflection on our lives does this for us today.

This seems to be the turning point for the woman. Notice she first refers to Jesus as a Jew, then as Sir, now as prophet. But, it seems as though she is now uncomfortable with the conversation because here, she tries to divert the interaction by kind of taking a left turn to the subject where Jews and her people worship.

That's still a common tactic when things hit too close to home, right? New subject, divert, divert...Until this happens, "The woman says to him, 'I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Christ; when he comes, he will tell us everything.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one speaking with you.'"

Now, we get to the water pot. After the disciples return, the woman leaves her water pot and returns to her townspeople to tell them about what just happened. To God's invitation, there must be a response on our part to move forward.

When Terri and I first met, if I'd just listened to her asking me out all the time...okay, it was me asking her out...well, if she'd just listened to my invitation, but never said yes, never went with me for pizza or for walks along the American River, we would never have gotten to know each other, never gotten married, never had any of the gifts or the love God has in store for us.

It's the same with God's invitation. We have to act. We have to turn away from some things in our life that come between God and us, so we can turn full face to Him. The woman left her pot at the well of earthly water. The pot is what we carry around holding onto the things of the world that distance us from God's love: seeking honor and power for the wrong reasons, indulging destructively into pleasures, or accumulating wealth, material things without using them as a steward of those gifts. The woman left her pot of worldly desires at the well, so she could be free of them to share what she has learned.

If one looks through the Bible, you'll find that everyone who encounters God and accepts Him into their life, goes on mission. The woman at the well was the first missionary of Jesus Christ. She returned to her town and seemingly told everybody whom she met and how He knew everything about her. And, at her word, they went to the well to see for themselves, finding Jesus. So, taken with His teaching and with His person, that they asked Him to stay with them and He did, for two days.

When we come to know our Lord, hear His teaching, welcome Him into our lives, He sends us on mission. He gives to us unending love, accompaniment throughout our lives, gifts of grace and peace, strengthening us along the way. Those gifts of the Divine life are intended to be given away to others. If we hold onto them we will shrink, if we share them we will grow. It's just the opposite of what the world tells us. But, it works. God will not be outdone in giving.

Where are you in this story? Are you coming to the well? Are you ready to accept God's invitation of marriage? Are you ready to leave your jar at the well and turn more closely to Jesus, or are you giving away the gifts you've received and receiving even more from our Heavenly Father?

Third Sunday of Lent

Lectionary: 28