

March 15, 2020

3rd Sunday of Lent

John 4:5-42 (The text in italics is omitted in the short form of the gospel.)

So Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered and said to her, "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." (The woman) said to him, "Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go call your husband and come back." The woman answered and said to him, "I do not have a husband." Jesus answered her, "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.' For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him,

"Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Anointed; when he comes, he will tell us everything." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking with you."

At that moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said, "What are you looking for?" or "Why are you talking with her?" The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Messiah?" They went out of the town and came to him. Meanwhile, the disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat." But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." So the disciples said to one another, "Could someone have brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'In four months the harvest will be here'? I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest. The reaper is already receiving his payment and gathering crops for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper can rejoice together. For here the saying is verified that 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work."

Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me everything I have done." When the Samaritans came to him, they invited him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. Many more began to believe in him because of his word, and they said to the woman, "We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world."

Background:

Scripture scholars doubt that this encounter actually took place. There is no evidence in the other three gospels that Jesus ever traveled into Samaria. As Jesus himself is sending out the apostles in Matthew, he forbids them

to venture into pagan or Samaritan regions. "Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them thus, 'Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'" (Matthew 10:5-6) However, in The Acts of the Apostles, John states that after the stoning of Steven, Philip went to Samaria to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. (Acts 8:5)

The text itself turns on the images of water, faith, light, life and death. The Church has chosen this text to help those preparing for Baptism at the Easter Vigil to reflect on these elements of our faith. The text also helps the entire Christian community to reflect on our own faith journey that leads us to accept Baptism.

A key element in the story is the breaking of traditionally accepted norms of behavior. As the woman herself notes, Jesus should not have spoken to an unescorted woman and a Samaritan. But she should not have been at the well in the middle of the day. In a society that is strictly gender separated, women went to the well in the morning and evening, men went during the day. However, the other women of the town probably did not accept this woman because of her relations with men. It is Jesus who engages her by asking for a drink. He then repeatedly engages her in conversation about issues that men only discussed with other men. As their discussion unfolds, there are several places Jesus could have broken off their conversation, but he does not. Again, social norms are broken when the woman goes into town to tell others about her encounter with Jesus. The market place where the men of the community would have gathered was also gender separated. Her presence there would be another break with traditional norms of moral behavior.

Why would Jesus behave in such a way that would cause scandal and jeopardize his credibility? John hints at that answer in Jesus' response to the disciples. In verse 27, the disciples come upon Jesus speaking with the woman. They wonder why he would be talking to her, but they do not ask. Instead, they invite him to eat something. He declines, telling them: "I have food to eat of which you do not know. My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work." Jesus does not need their food because he draws a different kind of strength from doing the will of the Father.

Jesus stopped at this well with his disciples because he was hungry and thirsty. As the text unfolds, his human hunger and thirst led him into a hunger and thirst for the food and drink that is only satisfied by doing God's will. The journey from human desire to God's desire is unfolding in both Jesus and the woman.

As the catechumens prepare for their Baptism, they, too, are being invited to reflect on how human desire has led them to desire the deeper things of God. They are being invited to experience, in Jesus, the God who deeply desires to stop and encounter all who are thirsting. We who are baptized into the water of life have already discovered this reality. We now take on penance and sacrifices to again experience our human thirsting, which leads, once more, to the waters of Baptism and to the table of the Eucharist.

Reflection Questions:

1. Can you recall a time in your life when you were truly thirsty? Recall as much as you can of the circumstances around that experience.
2. What are some of things for which you could say you thirst for today?
3. What are some of things people around you thirst for?
4. If you extended that image into the world or even the earth itself, what are the things for which they thirst?
5. Later, as John tells of the events of the passion, he will say, "...aware that everything was now finished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I thirst." (John 19:28) How do you hear that statement in light of this text?
6. Lastly, can you consider that God thirsts? For what is it that God would thirst?
7. When the disciples return and offer Jesus something to eat, he responds "I have food to eat of which you do not know." When have you had the experience of doing God's will that left you with a sense of being full or rich in way that food, even a great banquet, does not?
8. Can you take some time to talk with God about the ways you experience being thirsty, the barriers you experience to responding to the thirst of another, or maybe the image of a God who thirsts?

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Excerpts from the readings for March 15, 2020, the Third Sunday of Lent

In their thirst, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?"

Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? a little more and they will stone me!"

The Lord answered Moses, "Go in front of the people, with some of the elders of Israel, holding in your hand the staff with which you struck the river. I will be there in front of you, on the rock in Horeb. Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink."

This Moses did, in the presence of the elders of Israel. The place was called Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled there and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?"

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord; let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation.

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us bow down in worship;

let us kneel before the Lord who made us. He is our God, and we are the flock he guides.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice: "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,

as in the day of Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested me though they had seen my works."

Brothers and sisters: Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through Christ; we have gained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God.

And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts

through the Holy Spirit. Christ, while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly.

Only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Jesus came to a town of Samaria; Jacob's well was there. A woman came to draw water. Jesus said, "Give me a drink." The Samaritan said, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?"

—For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.— Jesus said, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying, 'Give me a drink,' you would ask him and he would give you living water."

The woman said, "Where can you get this water? Are you greater than Jacob, who gave us this well?"

Jesus said, "Who drinks this water will thirst again; 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.

"The hour is coming when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth."

The woman said, "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."

The woman went into the town and said, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done.

Could he be the Christ?" They went out of the town and came to him. Meanwhile, the disciples

urged him, "Rabbi, eat." But he said, "I have food to eat of which you do not know.

"My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work.

I sent you to reap what you have not worked for;

others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work."

Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him; and he stayed there two days.

Many more began to believe in him because of his word.

Excerpts from Exodus 17:3-7; Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; and John 4:5-42