

## Third Sunday of Lent

Year A

Ex 17:3-7

Ps 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

Rom 5:1-2, 5-8

Jn 4:5-42 or 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42

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Drawing water from the well was a commonplace experience for the Samaritan woman. Life was quite predictable, almost tedious, as she made her daily rounds. First, draw the water, then bring it back to the house, do all the household chores and repeat the drill day after day after day. And would she be given any recognition for this, any approbation? Of course not. She was a woman, and it was her job to draw water, and to take care of the house and all the men therein. They would expect her to do these things without question or discussion. There would be no collaboration in the household tasks. It's quite probable they never asked her what she thought about anything, confirming her in the role of a servant, a subject. Her entire life would impress upon her that she was of no value beyond the ancillary duties she performed. Imagine her surprise then on the day that Jesus encountered her at the well.

The evangelist understates the case in recounting that the Jews and Samaritans had nothing in common. They actually hated each other, their differences going back generations, not unlike what is going on in that area of the world today. In the *Dictionary of the Bible*, Fr. John McKenzie states: "There was no deeper breach of human relations in the contemporary world than the feud of Jews and Samaritans, and the breadth and depth of Jesus' doctrine of love could demand no greater act of a Jew than to accept a Samaritan as a brother." Jesus then defied the accepted norms of his day in the twofold manner of speaking not only to a woman, but to a Samaritan as well.

And Jesus converses with the Samaritan woman; he discusses religion with her and invites her to change her life, offering her salvation. Can we imagine the surprise of a woman whose experience was so utterly contrary, used to receiving orders, barely acknowledged in any conversation? After all, what could a woman possibly contribute?

Jesus' attitude in this encounter underlines the very first and most basic social teaching of the Church, that all people are created by God as God's children and deserve respect and dignity. No race, gender, or ethnic group is ever to be treated disrespectfully, or worse, to be used or exploited.

Water is essential for life. Similarly, justice is essential for spiritual life. Using water, Jesus demonstrates that we are spiritually alive and refreshed when we subscribe to the beliefs that fueled his preaching, that every person is God's child, every person is valuable, and the human race is called to live and work in solidarity.

In his discourse, Jesus says "Salvation is from the Jews." The Jews were considered God's chosen people, but not for their own sake. Rather, they were called to be instruments of salvation, signs and witnesses drawing others to believe in God. This was the mission and responsibility attached to the privilege of being God's chosen people. But as we all know, the

Jews became elitist and their hearts hardened against anyone who did not conform to their strict interpretations. Jesus challenged this in his words and actions. He defied the injustice of discriminating against perceived sinners, against foreigners, against women, against gentiles, and so he disturbed and angered those who adhered to these distortions. Never putting himself above others, he treated each person as a fellow child of God, worthy of his attention. Whatever their sin or weakness or failure, he addressed the person as someone of value who needed to change their ways; he never condemned a person for their illness, their gender, their social status, their occupation, their difference.

The Gospel, the very core of the Church's social teaching, challenges us nowadays to open our minds and hearts to the people among us whose customs and language and looks are different and whom we are tempted to mistrust because of the fear of terrorism. Jesus purposely used the Samaritans, acknowledged as the most feared and hated enemies of the Jews, in order to make his point. The story of the Good Samaritan, as well as the accounts of this Samaritan woman at the well, and the one leper, a Samaritan, who alone from the ten who were cured returned to thank him, teach about the inherent value of all human beings.

It is never acceptable for people to suffer in any part of the world, no matter their race, gender or ethnic background. Every day, thousands starve to death and perish from preventable diseases, countless people are struck down by AIDS, and women and children are enslaved in sweatshops. It is never acceptable to ignore people because we may perceive that they are different, perhaps less than we are, because of their poverty, their ignorance, the corruption of their governments, or any number of divisive distortions.

The Samaritan woman at the well learned the very valuable lesson that she was worthy of the attention of a great man, a prophet. She came away from that encounter challenged to change her ways. Her encounter with him was not only for her sake, but she understood her role as a means of salvation for others when she went to the town to bring others to him. Imagine, a woman being the means of preaching the good news! While it may be a mild acknowledgment for us, it was significantly more powerful in the days of Jesus.

A danger lurking in our midst is that we may be so used to the words of this story, indeed to the Gospel in general, that we fail to recognize just how radical and disturbing was the preaching and teaching of Jesus. He stood out because his words and actions were in sharp distinction to the self-righteous of his day who lost sight of their role as instruments of salvation and put themselves in the role of judging the worth of their fellow human beings. Our mission is to unite ourselves with him as those who are called to promote justice, to adhere to the words and actions of Jesus and to follow his example in going to the root problem, the systems which perpetuate injustice. With Jesus, let us stand in defiance of accepted norms and prejudices which further the fiction that some human beings are better than others, and that it is permissible to victimize the poor and uneducated.

Jesus recognized the value of the woman at the well and in so doing encouraged someone who was perceived to be of little value to act as an instrument of preaching the good news of salvation. It is our mission to follow his example, and to advance the cause of justice in whatever way we can.