

Year A Third Sunday in Lent Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well

In order to really understand and appreciate all that was going on in today's Gospel story, we need to remember that the bad blood between the Jewish people and the Samaritans had been ongoing for a very long time. They had become two separate kingdoms about a thousand years before Jesus was born. Though once belonging to the tribe of Joseph, one of the 12 tribes of Israel, Samaria had been invaded by Assyria, the population had intermarried, they worshipped God but also the gods of Assyria, and the Jewish people of southern Israel thought of the Samaritans as idol worshipping half-breeds worthy of contempt and even flat-out hatred.

Devout Jews would have nothing to do with the Samaritans and even went way out of their way to walk around Samaria to get to Galilee which was on the other side. Sounds a little ridiculous, doesn't it? Perhaps you may be thinking, "How could God's people act like that?"

Well, perhaps we also need to wonder then, how can some of God's people in Algoma pass along anti-immigrant emails and Facebook posts. Perhaps we need to wonder how some of God's people in Algoma can promote hate-filled anti-LGBTQ literature. Perhaps we need to wonder why some of God's people in Algoma say poor people are just lazy – they could get ahead if they would just get a job. And perhaps we need to wonder why some of God's people in Algoma have a problem with me – a woman – opening my mouth in church. Even if none of these sentiments apply to you, it *is* important for you to know that they are out there. It is part of the reason why many people in society are not interested in being here with us. Would you buy diet pills from a 300 pound salesman? There

are people naming themselves as Christians who proclaim the Word of Christ yet their lives proclaim a different message. They say, "Jesus loves you" while their lives are saying, "Jesus loves those who are just like me." There are people who name themselves as Christians but then walk around those who need them the most. Jesus shows us today that he does not walk around...he traveled straight into the heart of Samaria and, as his followers, that is where we must travel as well.

By marching into Samaria instead of around it, Jesus trampled the prevalent notions of prejudice and hatred. He trampled on the idea that *what* you are makes a difference to *who* you are in God's eyes. Jesus stomped his foot down on the cycle of judgement and oppression based on where you live, your ethnicity, and other characteristics. It was a cycle as old as time...the Romans were oppressing the Jews, the Jews were pushing around the Samaritans, and the village of Samaritans we meet today were bullying and ostracizing that one Samaritan woman. Were you horrified that she'd had numerous husbands and was now living with another man? Think about whose decision it was in those days to divorce and what future lay in front of a woman on her own. She was a victim in a long line of victims and oppressors until Jesus called a halt to it.

Paul echoes Jesus' teaching when he tells us that in Christ Jesus, there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female. Those are out-dated categories and today in the West we would perhaps say there is no longer Christian, Jew, or Muslim, no longer rich or poor, no longer immigrant or non-immigrant, indigenous or non-indigenous...We are all one...we are simply God's people.

Jesus' disciples were probably more than a little surprised and dismayed when he led them into Samaria. The verse right before our Gospel story today says that Jesus *had* to go to Samaria. We already know *other* Jews walked around. Jesus had to go because that was what God called him to do. Jesus not only went to Samaria but he interacted with a Samaritan – a female Samaritan. Not only a female Samaritan, but a female Samaritan scarred by life, pushed to the edge of society, gathering water in the heat of the day instead of the cool of the morning with the other women.

Jesus knows every single thing about this woman and still he offers to her living water, the freedom of the gospel, and the knowledge of God's Love with open arms, not with words of condemnation. He didn't tell her to stop living with the man she was living with. He knew everything and offered her salvation anyway. As is often the case, Jesus lets us know it is what is in the heart that matters. It was easy to miss in this long Gospel story but, this ostracized woman condemned by humans for her sins, had a heart of faith – she said to Jesus that she knew the Messiah would come.

And as she excitedly goes off to tell the good news to others in her village, we hear in Jesus' conversation with his disciples that what he is doing in Samaria is the work of the one who sent him, the harvest is ripe and he is gathering it for God. We also hear that the disciples must reap where Jesus has sown. Jesus has sown the seeds and has instructed us to harvest. He shows us today that we may be more than a little surprised and dismayed by the people we are called to love. But there are no exceptions in the two great commandments – Love God, love

others as you love yourself. There is no “except for...” added onto the end. Love God, love others as you love yourself.

As with the Samaritan woman, while Jesus knows every single thing about us, he still offers to us living water, the freedom of the gospel, the knowledge of God’s love with open arms.

And with this new found living water of Jesus Christ we are truly free to live knowing that we are loved as we are and then we in turn walk through unknown territories offering to others, who differ from us, this living water. Paul writes, since we are made right by faith, we now have peace with God, and Paul instructs fellow Christians to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor.11:1). Christ gave us his righteousness. But, being loved by God as we are does not mean we are to *stay* the way we are. We are told to imitate Christ. We must constantly strive to become more and more like Christ. This makes a world of difference in how we live and how we treat others. Next time you are tempted to walk around, walk, as Jesus did, straight into the heart of Samaria.