

Homily, Third Sunday of Lent

March 15, 2020

Readings:

Exodus 17:3-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-2, 5-8

John 4:5-42

Questions are haunting us today. There is so little that is known in the current COVID-19 pandemic. Where is the virus in my community? Do I know anyone who is sick? If I become ill, how will it affect me? How can I get basic necessities if I have to self-quarantine? Will there be a hospital bed if I need it? What future plans do I have that might be cancelled, like an out-of-town vacation or conference? All of a sudden, life feels much less secure. Something unseen has suddenly become dangerous. All we can do is wait and practice good hygiene.

The Samaritan woman in today's gospel is also full of questions. Why is this Jewish man talking to me, let alone asking me for a drink? How can Jesus give me water when he has no bucket? Where can living water be found? This man can't be greater than Leah and Rachel and Jacob, can he? Can Jesus give me this living water? How does Jesus know about my marital history? Where is the proper place to worship God? Could Jesus be the long-awaited Messiah?

First, we need to understand that Samaritans and Jews, by the time of Jesus, were religious, and in previous times political, enemies. It started around 900 BCE (before common era) when the united kingdom of David and Solomon split apart, creating the kingdoms of Israel, the northern part, and Judah, the southern part. Cut off from the Jerusalem Temple, the kingdom of Israel established new worship centers, one of which was at Shechem, later called Sychar, at the foot of Mount Gerizim. In 722 BCE the northern kingdom, whose capital was Samaria, was defeated by the Assyrian Empire, its elite people deported and dispersed, and

people from other parts of the empire resettled in their place. The people in that area became known as Samaritans. The Assyrian Empire fell to the Babylonian Empire around 610 BCE, and the Samaritans quietly submitted to their new overlord. But the people in the southern kingdom did not, and in 587 BC Judah rebelled against the Babylonians, was defeated, and the elites were deported to Babylonia. Unlike the people of the northern kingdom, the people of Judah were not dispersed by the Babylonians and thus retained their identity, so that when the Persians defeated the Babylonians in 539 BCE, the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews of Babylon to return to Judah. The returning exiles set about rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, and the Samaritans offered their help. It was rejected, however, because the Jews believed the Samaritans were not ethnically or religiously pure. Thereafter, the Samaritans hindered the rebuilding effort and built a competing worship center at Shechem (present-day Nablus). Relations between the two peoples continued to deteriorate, with Jews considering Samaritans as ritually unclean from birth and Samaritans considering Jews as heretics. In the Maccabean era (164-63 BCE), when Judah was independent of the Greek empires in the region, the Jewish high priest led an army to Shechem and destroyed the sanctuary there around 110 BCE. The Romans invaded Palestine in 63 BCE and later combined Judea and Samaria into a Roman province. Jews and Samaritans detested each other so much that, by the time of Jesus, Jews from Galilee would bypass Samaria on their way to and from Jerusalem, even though it made the trip much longer, and Samaritans would harass Jews traveling through their territory.

We are well aware of the low esteem in which women were held at the time of Jesus. Women were considered as belonging first to their fathers and then to their husbands. Women's primary roles were limited to the home. Their rights of inheritance, their choice of relationships, their ability to pursue a religious education or participate in the synagogue, and their freedom of movement were all

severely restricted. Women were not allowed to talk to men in public, not even to their male family members. They did not participate in public life nor were they accepted as witnesses. They had no autonomy, so could not instigate divorce proceedings against abusive husbands. On the other hand, husbands were allowed to divorce their wives simply because a wife had burnt a meal.

Religiously, the Samaritans accepted the first five books of the Bible as sacred scripture, but rejected all other books in the Hebrew scriptures, such as the history books and the prophets. They worshipped YHWH and considered Moses to be the last and most exalted of the prophets. They considered Mount Gerizim to be the place where God dwelled, as opposed to Jerusalem, and edited their Torah to make Mt. Gerizim the place to offer sacrifice. They awaited the Day of the Lord and the coming of the Messiah who would be a prophet like Moses. Samaritans considered themselves as the true believers of YHWH as opposed to the Jews, while Jews considered them to be Gentiles.

Thus, Jesus asking for a drink of water from a Samaritan woman violated Jewish purity laws, social customs, and religious restrictions. But, not only was it scandalous for Jesus to request water from this woman, the fact that the woman was drawing water at noon indicated that she was a social outcast in her town. Women usually drew water at dawn and sunset, the cooler parts of the day, and they socialized as they completed this necessary chore. This woman, however, did not feel welcome among the women of her town, so she went for water, alone, at the hottest part of the day.

Jesus' request to this woman startled her into speech. Basically, she said, "Don't you realize the wide gulf between us, a respected Jewish rabbi and an outcast Samaritan woman? Why are you even talking to me, let alone asking a favor of me?" Jesus, encouraged that the woman didn't ignore him, and wanting to take down the barriers she had erected, started a religious conversation with her.

The woman reacted literally to Jesus's offer of living water. Jesus didn't have a bucket with which to draw water. He couldn't be greater than Leah and Rachel and Jacob, who had established this well. Yet Jesus persisted, trying to draw her into seeing who he was and what he could offer her. She stayed at the literal level, wanting to find a spring of water from the earth so that she did not have to draw water from a deep well that had to be hauled up by a rope, hand over hand, then pouring that water into a large clay pot and toting it back to her house. She continued to engage Jesus in conversation, wanting to find an easier way to carry out an onerous chore. And she began to respect Jesus, calling him "sir."

Realizing that his first approach in leading the woman to faith in him was not working, Jesus tried another approach by asking her to fetch her husband. She replied that she had no husband. We don't know how Jesus knew about her marital history. But we should not see the woman as faithless and immoral for having five husbands and currently living with a man who would not marry her. Remember that women could not initiate divorce and could be divorced simply for burning a meal. Her marital history is another sign of her outcast status, an unwanted woman who was being passed from man to man, losing more and more respect from the townspeople.

When Jesus disclosed that he knew about her marriages, the woman finally recognized that this was no ordinary Jewish rabbi and shifted from calling him "sir" to "prophet." She showed that she had thought about the religious differences between Jews and Samaritans and was concerned about how to worship God properly. Was it at Mt. Gerizim or at the Jerusalem Temple? At first, Jesus highlighted the religious superiority of the Jews over the Samaritans, something I think the woman would have resented. But then Jesus told her that the time was here when God would be worshipped wherever a person was, and not in one specific place. God could not be contained in a box, no matter how hallowed that

box might be. And God was to be worshipped by all people, not only by those who considered themselves as chosen by God.

This was certainly something new for the woman to ponder! As she considered Jesus' words, she voiced the hope of Samaritans, that the Messiah, the prophet-like-Moses, was expected. Was this true? And what is surprising is that not only did Jesus confirm that the prophet-like-Moses would come, but also proclaimed himself as that prophet, that Messiah. In the gospel of John, this is the first time that Jesus identified himself as the long-awaited Messiah. He did not do so with John the Baptist, the early disciples, and Nicodemus, who had earlier sought him out. No, Jesus fully revealed himself for the first time to an outcast Samaritan woman. Jesus showed that he was not bound by gender, cultural or religious stereotypes. He did not turn away when the woman initially took him literally instead of symbolically. He respected her beliefs while leading her to a greater revelation. And he did so because the Samaritans believed that the Messiah would be a prophet, not a conquering king. The Jews around Jesus expected a warrior Messiah, so he did not feel free to fully disclose himself to them. He felt safe in identifying himself to the Samaritan woman, because she understood who the Messiah would be.

With her acceptance of Jesus' identity, the spring of water that Jesus had promised began to bubble up. She forgot about her chores, her outcast state, her being a woman, everything that had held her back. She went back to her village and told the story of the Jewish prophet she met at the well who said he was the Messiah. She was a changed woman, and the townspeople could hardly recognize her. The one who was shunned, who stayed in the background, who didn't participate in the life of the town, was now going from person to person, inviting them to join her in speaking with this man. When we think of the woman's previous position in the town, her acceptance of Jesus must have made a marvelous

difference in her! She left behind not only her water jug, but her fear, her shame, and her acceptance as an outcast. The townspeople wanted to see the rabbi who had made her into a changed person. And they, too, came to belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the promised prophet-like-Moses.

These days we have more questions than answers, and fear is threatening to overtake us. The World Health Organization has referred to the glut of information coming at us as an “infodemic,” making it difficult for the general public to figure out what is effective to do. Staying home appears to be the safest thing to do, but it comes with downsides, such as losing touch with other people we usually see. The questions that the Samaritan woman had were answered by Jesus. It will take some time, but eventually our questions about the coronavirus will be answered as well. Let us take comfort knowing that Jesus walks with us in spite of our fears, our concerns, our uncertainties, our efforts to avoid others so that we don’t become ill ourselves.

I invite you to sit with this story and imagine how it occurred. These are some questions to explore as you meditate on this passage. What kind of stereotypes are binding us from interacting with other people, and how can we overcome them? What does it mean that Jesus, in John’s gospel, first disclosed himself to an outcast Samaritan woman? What do we need to leave behind so that we’re free to proclaim the good news? How are we to act during this perilous time?