

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

John 4:5-42

Our Scripture passage for this for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of John 4:5-42. In this passage, we read about Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman at the well and the impact our Lord has on her life. This story offers several points worthy of our reflection and prayer during this sacred time of Lent.

The passage begins by telling us that Jesus had to go to Samaria. That's not a geographical necessity. Rather, it is a statement of God's will that the message of the Gospel should move outside the Jewish world and be presented to the rest of humanity including women and Samaritans. The Gospel isn't just for those who are like us, whomever that may be. It is also for those whom social conventions deem marginalized. By bringing the Gospel to the Samaritan woman, Jesus is inviting her to be a disciple who can become a missionary capable of bringing other marginalized people to Him. In a similar way, God asks us to go outside our world of comfort and familiarity so as to encounter others and in doing so to encounter the Lord. We will meet Him in Samaria! When we choose to only associate with people who are like us, we cannot be effective witnesses of Jesus to those who most need Him. We like to meet God on terms that are comfortable and when we are in control, but God reveals Himself to us on His terms, which require us to surrender and experience vulnerability. There are privileged places of encounter where we can experience Jesus more readily and intensely. These are the settings and people with whom Jesus freely chose to identify Himself: the poor, the suffering, the imprisoned, the sick, the oppressed, and the outcast.

- 1. What opportunities do you have to show God's love to the marginalized in your world (professional, personal, family, friends, and so forth)?*
- 2. When have you encountered the presence of God through your contact with the outcasts?*
- 3. When has your personal experience of vulnerability or weakness become the setting in which you experienced God's presence in a privileged way?*
- 4. When have you experienced God's love reaching out to you when you felt marginalized?*
- 5. There is a point when disciples are called to become apostles who freely share with others the gift of faith they have received; that's the moment when the woman goes to tell others about Jesus. For whom have you been an apostle of Jesus in order to help them recognize and encounter the Lord in their lives even as you have encountered Him in yours?*

It is interesting that Jesus comes to the well at the hottest hour of the day and asks the woman to do Him a favor. Namely, He requests a cup of water. In response, she opens herself to dialogue rather than simply dismissing our Lord's request. She thinks that in giving Him a cup of water she would be doing Jesus a favor. In reality, she was allowing the Lord to do her a favor. Inconveniences are the vehicle through which God sometimes invites us to open ourselves to receive His grace as well. If we only knew the gifts God wants to give us when we open ourselves to Him with greater generosity and availability. Think of how many times in your day you experience brief moments of inspiration inviting you to stop and consider doing good for others. These moments

can be inconvenient, yet they can also be opportunities to allow the Lord to use our lives just as He used the life of the woman of Samaria. God is never outdone in generosity, and we are always blessed with more than we give when we offer to the Lord the gift of our time and talent to do His will. We would all be willing to invest our time and energy in an opportunity if we were guaranteed a greater gift in return. We are called to be generous disciples of Jesus who willingly respond to such moments of inspiration.

- 1. What are some of the inconveniences you experience that could be invitations from God to open your life to others and so be blessed by the Lord?*
- 2. When has responding to someone else's need been a moment of grace and deepened your faith?*
- 3. When has a brief gesture of kindness for someone else initiated for you a deeper relationship with God or others?*
- 4. What can you do to make yourself more receptive and responsive to inconvenient moments of inspiration in your day?*

Faith is a process because God always wants to lead us more deeply into relationship with Him. We see that desire and process taking place in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. At the beginning of her interaction with Jesus, she refers to our Lord simply as a "Jew". Then she calls Him "Sir": Eventually she acknowledges that He is a "Prophet". Finally she wonders if Jesus could be the "Messiah". Her faith remained incomplete through- out this process of encounter, and for that reason Jesus calls her to even deeper faith and reveals Himself to her as "I AM". That is a very important statement because "I AM" is the divine name of God given to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Jesus is revealing to her that He is God. Although she does not grasp this revelation, Jesus continues calling her to deeper faith. So, too, our Lord calls each of us to ever-deeper knowledge of Him and ever-greater relationship with Him. This call to deeper faith occurs through the events of our lives and the conversations of our prayer. God calls us to trust Him evermore, and when we accept that invitation, then the Lord reveals Himself to us with greater clarity. Deepened knowledge of God leads to deepened trust in God. We, like the woman, can find ourselves being called to leave behind our former preoccupations (the water jar) and become messengers of faith to others like she did for her village. How we understand Jesus determines how well we will serve Him. The woman in the story was not motivated to bring the message of her encounter with Jesus to the town until she realized He was the fulfillment of God's plan for her life.

- 1. What have been some of the significant milestones in the development of your faith life by which you came to know the Lord more clearly?*
- 2. How has deepened faith practically expressed itself in more committed discipleship in your life?*
- 3. What adult faith enrichment opportunities or experiences have opened your eyes to see the Lord more clearly and respond with more committed discipleship?*
- 4. What can you do this next year to take the next step in deepening your faith or becoming more active in the mission of the Gospel as a disciple?*

Next, Jesus leads the woman to a personal encounter with Him so that she can worship in "spirit" and "truth". Jesus Himself will later state in John's Gospel that He is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (14:6). Truth is not a concept but a person: Jesus. The same topic came up in the conversation with Pilate in which the Lord remained silent and presented Himself as the visible truth (18:37-38). To worship in "truth" is to worship Jesus. We read in the opening lines of John's Gospel that "The Word of God became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). When Jesus conversed with Nicodemus in John 3:1-36, Jesus spoke of how the Spirit is the gift of God that allows us to be caught up in the very life and mystery of God. The Spirit, then, brings us into the life of the Trinity. We become a temple of the Holy Spirit when we are born again in baptism. To worship in Spirit is to live each day immersed in the life of God whereby we are unconditionally and totally directed to God. God is not limited to a mountain or a place or a sanctuary; God offers Himself in an all-pervading personal presence to the believer requiring our complete response and surrender.

1. *What are ways in which we try to limit God's presence to certain places today?*
2. *What part of people's lives can they find most difficult to surrender to the Lord?*
3. *What does it mean to you when we say, "Truth is a person"?*
4. *You are a temple of the Holy Spirit. When do you most sense God's movement in your life drawing you to Himself?*
5. *Who is someone you know who demonstrates what it means to worship God in Spirit and Truth?*
6. *In which of these two aspects of authentic worship do you most want to grow?*
7. *How will you pursue that growth?*

One other dynamic in this passage that should be noted is when Jesus points out the previous five husbands of the Samaritan woman. Our Lord's discussion with the woman had yielded initial results, but she was still thinking on the earthly level of physical things (water). Jesus wanted to open her heart and mind to go to a deeper level but something was preventing that conversation from progressing. It is at this moment, in verse 16, that Jesus asks her to go and call her husband. Although this request is presented as something extraneous to their conversation it actually demonstrates that Jesus is trying to find another venue to lead her deeper faith. She responds by stating that she has no husband, which is the opening the Lord needs to point out her five previous marriages and the implied illicit relationship she is currently in. Scripture scholars debate whether or not this is an indication of the woman's sinful life and, if so, what such an indication means. Perhaps the woman was trying to hide a part of her life from the Lord because she was embarrassed for Jesus to see her as she really was. Perhaps the acknowledgement of her past and current illicit relationship was a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. The significance of her personal background as an essential part of this conversation should not be underestimated since it was part of the good news she announced to her village. What is certain is that this revelation opened the door for the woman to take the next step in her faith and to proclaim Jesus as a Prophet. Most likely, Jesus reached a point in the

conversation of faith where the dialogue could not continue until some particular obstacles were acknowledged and at least addressed, if not resolved. Honesty and complete disclosure was a necessary part of their communication at this point. Sometimes our prayer becomes stagnant when we try to keep a part of our lives from the Lord as well. God knows us and loves us for who we are as part of His creation. Sin always mars the beauty of God's creation. Prayer is the place above all where we need to be honest and open with the Lord so that God can love us and heal us of our sinful past and lead us to fullness of life. When we try to offer a selective presentation of ourselves to the Lord, we are deceiving ourselves-not God. It is that falseness of self that often prevents our encounter with God from going deeper. There are times in our lives of faith when the same thing happens to us. The Lord wants to lead us deeply into communion with Him, but practices of sin in our lives can cause us to remain in a superficial relationship instead. It is out of mercy and love that the Lord helps us recognize these impediments to profound relationship. The awareness of the presence of sin in our lives allows us to identify the obstacles that are holding us back from deeply committing ourselves to God. Once we know the presence of sin, we can seek God's forgiveness and reconciliation in the Sacrament of Confession. The newfound freedom of forgiveness allows us to continue our journey of faith to deeper levels just as it did for the Samaritan woman.

- 1. When do you identify with the Samaritan woman who was stuck on a superficial level in her spiritual life?*
- 2. How has the Sacrament of Reconciliation given you the freedom, strength, and grace to deepen your spiritual life?*
- 3. If Jesus invited you to profound relationship with Him now, what current sinful practices would practically hold you back from accepting that invitation?*
- 4. Our Lord spoke to the Samaritan woman with honesty, love, and mercy. Who has loved you in such a way that they have actually helped you overcome obstacles to your spiritual growth?*
- 5. Who are you called to love with honesty and mercy so as to help them identify obstacles in their spiritual life in order to grow closer in communion with the lord?*
- 6. Why do you think Jesus asked the woman to bring her husband?*
- 7. When has your relationship with the Lord been able to move forward because you choose to acknowledge and seek forgiveness for particular situations of sin in your life?*

Lastly, it is worth reflecting on the sequential development of themes in this gospel passage. Specifically, Jesus and the woman first speak about the gifts of God (that is, the well, living water, and so forth) but then Jesus moves the conversation from the gifts of God to the ultimate Gift of God, the very presence of God Himself in Jesus. Maybe the Lord wants to change our focus in the same way so that we pray not so much for the gifts but for union with the Giver. Basically, Christian faith is about relationship and not getting what we want. Sometimes we can so focus our prayer on what we want that we are more interested in the gifts God gives us than the gift of God Himself. This subtle movement in the gospel passage invites us during this third week

of Lent to examine our prayer and purity of our intentions and petitions. God desires to be in relationship with us, and every blessing we receive from the Lord is a sign of His goodness and love. The Lord's blessings are meant to incline our hearts and minds to love God in return rather than walk away, only to come back when we need something else.

1. *How do you feel when someone only comes to you because of what you give them rather than for who you are?*
2. *What do you seek in your prayer-the gifts of God or communion with God Himself?*
3. *When has a gift of God led you to a deeper relationship with Him?*
4. *What can you do to more effectively seek communion with God?*