

The Third Sunday in Lent
Romans 5:1-11, Psalm 95, John 4:5-30
David H. Teschner
March 23,2014

It is still true in many second and third world countries that women do much of the back-breaking work of collecting and carrying firewood, carrying water or hoeing, weeding and harvesting large agricultural tracts. In African countries, we've all seen pictures of women with large baskets of goods balanced on their heads. Remembering our trip to Nepal, we crossed paths with numerous small women with big baskets on their backs picking up donkey dung to be used to fuel their fires.

The Samaritan woman in today's gospel story was typical, then, having to walk a considerable distance with her bucket, probably a clay pot, to fetch water at the well. But that is all that is ordinary about this story.

In the first place, she has gone there by herself at an odd hour. Village women would have come together in the early morning or late evening. In the cooler hours of day, the walk to and from the well was a time for socialization, catching up on village news and spreading juicy gossip. The drudgery and exertion of lugging heavy water containers was easier with friends.

Strangely, this particular Samaritan woman was at the well alone at midday, the hottest time. We can assume she was shunned by the other women and preferred her own company. More than likely, much of the other women's entertainment came from telling stories about her. If she had been married five times and was presently living with a man who wasn't her husband, there would have been a lot for the other women to talk about. Who cared what the truth was?

Then she meets a man at the well – and not any man but a Jewish man. Jews and Samaritans had been enemies for hundreds of years. Many Jews travelling from the south, where Jerusalem was, to the north, where the Sea of Galilee was, would swing far to the east or west to avoid going the most direct route through the region known as Samaria. A Jewish man might not even speak to his own wife in public and rarely another Jewish woman. For Jesus to speak to this Samaritan woman was a shocker. The woman herself expresses total surprise. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

This, of course, opens up the all-important discourse about who Jesus is and what he has to offer. The woman initially thinks “living water” must be drawn with a bucket from the well. Still confused, she confesses to wanting some so she doesn’t have to keep traipsing back to the well.

Then Jesus tries another tactic. He leaves the spiritual for the moment and dabbles in the personal. He tells the woman, “Go get your husband and come back.” Now the story gets really interesting when she admits to not having a husband, and Jesus says he knows all about her marital history. Jesus has a sort of x-ray vision into her soul. Is this Jesus’ way of saying to her that he knows how hungry and thirsty she is for love, respect and companionship? Have men used her or has she looked for love in all the wrong places, as the song goes?

Jesus may be treating her with respect and dignity for the first time in her life. He is offering her the greatest gift – a wellspring of joy, peace, love and happiness. The living water comes from him and is received by being in his presence. If she feels guilty for her past failed relationships, she doesn’t get absolution from Jesus but rather complete acceptance.

With this gift of living water that is Jesus himself, she also has rocket fuel to speed back into town forgetting her own water jar, as if now obsolete, to share her good fortune. The transformation and rejuvenation of this marked and wanton woman gets the attention of the townsfolk. She is no longer of no consequence and the subject of gossip. We’re told her appeal to come and see the man who knows all about me without condemnation works, and the people leave the city on their way to him.

Last week Nicodemus was a saintly, law-abiding Jew, who came to Jesus and didn’t get it. This week the woman is a marginal, sin-stained outsider, and she changes an entire city as a result of her encounter with Jesus.

I met a young woman recently who related to me a remarkable story about her life. She told me that she had lost a good job, gotten divorced and been addicted to alcohol and drugs. Now she is going to church, meeting regularly in a small Bible-based support group and feeling brand new by the grace of God. She was beaming and wanted me to know that Jesus had changed her life.

As you might imagine, I was really happy for her. She has quite a story to tell, a compelling testimony for anyone who thinks that failure, waywardness, loss and despair signal the end. Like the Samaritan woman, this modern-day human casualty knows about living water that can be poured into the hearts of those who have hit the wall or found that their well is dry or their tank empty. That living water, which is the

unconditional love of God in Christ Jesus, can make one feel clean, refreshed, re-energized and pure inside.

St. Paul states it precisely when writing to the Christians in Rome. He says, "But God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." God doesn't love us because we have our act together. God loves us, period, all the time. Claim that love every hour of every day for yourself, and spread it everywhere, especially with those who, we think, might deserve it least. AMEN.