

3 Lent – Year A – March 27, 2011
Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42
Susan E. Wilmot

At her local church, a woman approached her priest with the news that she'd been talking with God, and that God had been telling her things. Immediately skeptical, the priest asks the woman what kinds of things God has shared with her. After relating a few items, he is still doubtful, and decides to test the truth of the woman's claims. He thinks for a moment and then asks the woman to ask God what is the worst sin he has ever committed. The woman agrees to take the request before the Lord and listen for God's response. A few days later when she meet with the priest again, the woman tells him that she has an answer to his question. We'll get to that in a few minutes, but first, we're going to explore Jesus' own scandalous conversation with a Samaritan woman, set in contrast to His conversation with rabbi Nicodemus.

In last week's epistle, Paul helped us to see the importance of understanding our identity in relationship with God in Christ Jesus, and with one another. We discovered four key elements that are integral to our identity in Christ, which define our relationships, and therefore how we put our faith into action in the world. These are faith and hope, love and forgiveness. Each is a gift from God in the person of Jesus, and each is a bridge to abundant life, through our relationship with Him.

Today's Gospel story begins with Jesus resting at Jacob's well near in Samaria. The bitter hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans has a long history, even in Jesus' day. It begins with the exile of the elite Israelite population by the conquering Assyrians. The peasant farmers that remain are integrated with people from five different nations, and their gods. Eventually, they all come to worship the God of Israel, but not quite in the same way as the returning exiles. By 400 BC, the returned exiles refuse the Samaritans' offer to help rebuild the Temple. The growing rift between the Israelites and the Samaritans gets even deeper. Not only is the authenticity of Samaritan worship rejected by the Israelites, but having intermarried with the people from other nations, their racial purity is also deemed unacceptable.

Now here is Jesus at Jacob's well. When God speaks to Moses at the burning bush, God says, "I AM the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). The Samaritans' lineage and ours is traced back to Abraham. The mention of Jacob reminds us of Jacob's dream of a ladder reaching into heaven, on which the angels of God move between heaven and earth. God incarnate is sitting at Jacob's well, in all His humanity, tired and thirsty. He's about to embark on a crucial extension of His mission, one that will eventually reveal God's plan of salvation for the whole world. All creation is to be reconciled to God's self in Christ Jesus. Jesus' mission is one of reconciliation, one of breaking down boundaries between people, and extending the gift of God's love and forgiveness to all. In the person of Jesus, the gap between God and the world is bridged. In Jesus, the barriers that we erect between ourselves are broken down, and reconciliation not only becomes possible, but also becomes reality as part of our living and active faith.

Putting all human boundaries aside for the sake of fulfilling His divine mission, Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman, asking her for a drink of water. A cool drink of water will become a visible manifestation of a deeper reality. In even speaking to the unnamed woman, Jesus is breaking all kinds of social, cultural, and religious barriers. No orthodox Jewish man may be alone in the presence of a strange woman, or even speak to a woman in public, most especially not a despised Samaritan. To ask her for a drink is absolutely scandalous. However, such is God's desire for reconciliation that Jesus sets all this aside, not only to assuage his own burning thirst, but also to extend God's grace to this woman, and her people. Time has not changed God's goal. We are now Christ's hands and feet, the voice of Christ extending God's gracious invitation to all who do not yet know the Savior of the world, or the true meaning of God's gift of redemption in the person of Jesus.

As the conversation continues, we see the difference between this woman and rabbi Nicodemus. Considered property, the woman has been passed along, used and probably abused by at least five different

men in her life. Yet this woman, whom Nicodemus would condemn as an unrighteous sinner, moves from seeing Jesus as an unremarkable Jewish traveler, to naming Him as a prophet, to pondering whether He might be the anointed one or Messiah, to believing in Him as Savior of the world. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God alone bears the title Savior. Nicodemus comes to Jesus, yet fails to recognize God's Son, despite being familiar with all the signs Jesus has performed. Nicodemus, a spiritual leader, one intimately acquainted with ritual purity and cleansing, one immersed in the Scriptures, does not understand Jesus' references to God's spiritual gifts. And the most Nicodemus will acknowledge is that Jesus is a teacher sent by God.

We might ask ourselves where we stand in our relationship with Jesus. Perhaps the biggest difference between the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus is the recognition of the need for forgiveness, and the need for a Savior. Closely followed by a heart that is still vulnerable and open to discerning God's will, and to hearing God speak. As well as eyes that are willing to see Jesus as God's chosen instrument of forgiveness, and salvation for the whole world. Forgiveness and salvation are two sides of the same coin in the divine currency, defined by love. In God's gracious and loving gift of salvation, all our sins are forgiven, and we are released from the bondage of death. Lent is a special season, set aside for intentional self-examination and repentance. The purpose of which is to be reconciled with God, and with others. God desires that we each bridge our relational differences, and break through our cultural prejudices, in the same way that Christ extends God's gracious hospitality across all earthly boundaries.

At its heart, reconciliation is about fulfilling our own baptismal vows to seek and serve Christ in all persons, respecting the dignity of all. Jesus ensures that the unnamed Samaritan woman knows that she is worthy of His time and attention. He gently guides her from literal and mundane thinking into a deeper reality and connection to God. He reveals to her His own identity as God incarnate. Her past life is enfolded in God's loving presence in the present, and she accepts the gift of faith, which secures her future hope. Like the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8), the Samaritan woman is freed for discipleship after Jesus exposes her hidden past. Jesus does not judge her. Instead, He empowers her to be an apostle in His service. The nameless nobody, scorned and marginalized by her own people, is Jesus' chosen agent who begins the process of reconciling the Jews and the Samaritans.

In Jesus' eyes, you and I are also empowered to be agents of reconciliation in our own relationships with family and friends, enemies and strangers. In an old Pogo cartoon strip, one of the characters acknowledges a truth that many of us may have avoided, when he says, "We [have] met the enemy, and [it] is us." In this season of self-examination, we dig deeper to figure out who we really are in Christ. Or, perhaps we discover that a huge part of our self has fearfully skirted around a closer walk with Jesus, or has tried to hide in dark shame for things past or present. Some of us may find that our real enemy *is* ourselves, that the real stranger in our lives is that part of us that resists Jesus.

Our young priest has just been told by his parishioner that God has answered the question about the worst sin he has ever committed. Surprised, and seriously dismayed, the priest asks the woman what God said. She replies that God has told her, "I no longer remember." Jesus constantly invites us to drink from the well of Living water, to experience healing and forgiveness, and above all, to be embraced by God's boundless love. In Christ, I am forgiven and healed. In Christ, you are forgiven and healed. In Christ, we are not strangers or enemies to one another or ourselves. In Christ, we are beloved children of God. We are brothers and sister in Christ, here for one another, just as Christ is always here for us. It's time to come and drink deeply from the well of Living water with our whole self: body, mind, and spirit.

Amen.