

The 3rd Sunday of Lent: Holy Trinity Church: March 23, 2014

John 4: 5-42: *If Not You, Then Who?*

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Our Gospel story is set in Samaria in a town called Sychar at Jacob's well.

The Samaritans were a group of Jews from the province of Samaria who had

intermarried with the Assyrians during Babylonian Exile. The Jews

considered Samaritans to be social outcasts, untouchables, racially inferior

and of practicing a false religion. Both Jews and Samaritans claimed to be the

true descendants of the nation of Israel. Samaritans descended from the

northern kingdom of Israel while the Jews descended from the southern

kingdom of Judah. The Jews believed Jerusalem was the only true place of

worship, for the Samaritans Mt. Gerizim was the only true place of worship.

About 130 years before Jesus was born, the Jews actually destroyed the

Samaritan temple at Mt. Gerizim. Any close physical contact with a

Samaritan, especially drinking water from a common bucket or eating a meal

together, would make a Jew ritually unclean. This meant they were unable to

offer sacrifice in the temple to worship God for an extended period of time.

The relationship between the Jews and Samaritans was very similar to the

relationship between Jews and Palestinians today. If there was some way to remove blind hatred from human relationships, we could solve most of the world's problems between Jews and Arabs, militant Islamists and the people of the West, blacks and whites, Anglos and Latinos, straights and gays, Republicans and Democrats,; the list goes on and on.

Back in the mid-1980s, HIV/AIDS came to the Unites States. At that time, I remember at the time reading a story about a priest serving a church in a run-down area of Brooklyn, New York. The priest got a telephone call one day from the local funeral director who said that he had a funeral that nobody wanted to take. None of the priests or ministers in the area wanted anything to do with this funeral. The man had died of AIDS. The priest took the funeral. He said that when he got to the funeral home, there were about 30 gay men sitting quietly. They never looked up at him. Their heads were bowed down and they stared at the floor the whole time he spoke. After the funeral service was over they got into the awaiting cars and went to the cemetery. He stood on one side of the grave with the undertaker and the men stood on the other side. They were frozen in place like statues. They seemed to be motionless. They never moved as he read the Scriptures and prayed. They lowered the body into the grave and the priest pronounced the benediction. He turned to leave and then he realized that none of them were moving. He turned back and

asked, “Is there anything more I can do?” One of the men said, “Yes. They always read the 23rd Psalm at these things and you didn’t do that. Would you read the 23rd Psalm?” The priest said, “Certainly.” And he did. Another man spoke up and he said, “There is a passage in the 3rd chapter of John which says that the spirit of God goeth where it leadeth and you cannot tell on whom the spirit of God falls. Could you read that passage?” And he did, and then one of the men asked, “Would you read to me and to all of us that passage that speaks about the love of God, that nothing can separate us from the love of God?” And the priest said, “*Neither height nor depth nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come, neither life nor death, nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” The priest said nothing was more thrilling than to say to these men, these contemporary Samaritans, who had been so marginalized and so shamed by society and the church, that God still loved them and that nothing could separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. That, my dear sisters and brothers, is grace. We may not agree with one another, we may not approve of one another, but must we hate one another? In the providence of God it is probably not accidental that our story for today on this 3rd Sunday in Lent is set in Samaria. The greatest problem in our world today is not global

warming or poverty. The greatest problem is the animosity and hatred between the many God given diverse people all over the world.

Remember, it was Jesus who reached out to the Samaritan woman when she arrived at the well. When she somewhat curtly turns aside his request for water, he turns a seemingly chance encounter into an evangelistic opportunity. Jesus says to her, *“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”* This is a significant statement. Jesus is offering the gift of grace to this Samaritan woman. It is clear that Jesus targeted his ministry to the Jews, and Jews alone. In Matthew 15, he says specifically, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”* Yet here in John’s Gospel, Jesus is offering the gift of “living water” to a Samaritan woman. He explains to her that if you drink this living water, you will never be thirsty again. But then the situation gets even more remarkable. She responds to his offer: “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” And then Jesus sharply changes the direction of their conversation startling her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” “I have no husband,” she replies. Jesus says to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” “Sir,” the shamed woman says, “I can

see that you are a prophet.” He was a prophet, all right, but he was different than any other prophet she would ever encounter. He was breaking down all the cultural barriers and taboos. He was reaching out to a shamed woman, a Samaritan woman, a Samaritan woman who had been married five times and who was now living with a man who was not her husband. And he offers her grace. This is startling even to this day, not for what it says about Jesus, but for what it says about us. My brothers and sisters in Christ, how do we as a faith community miss the Gospel message so completely? How did we become so judgmental toward others? How do we allow ourselves to shut out those of whom we disapprove, when time and time again Jesus did exactly the opposite? What is wrong with us that we cannot love those for whom he died? The Good News of the Gospel is that God’s grace is available to all including those of whom we may disapprove, to the moral, immoral and the amoral, to the Arab and the Jew, to the citizen and the illegal immigrant, to gay, straight and transgendered people, to black people, to brown people, to yellow people, and to white people. And to all it is the good news. You see, not only are we blinded by our own prejudice and bias towards people like the Samaritan woman with her lifestyle, we are also blinded to the fact that we are the Samaritan woman. We, too, have fallen short of the grace of God’s grace, but the hand of God’s grace is always reaching out to us as well. The

story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is the story of a changed life. The Samaritan woman is obviously taken back by this prophetic insight. Sir, she says, I know that one day Messiah, the one who is called Christ, will come and he will tell us all things. Jesus answered: "I am He, the one who is speaking to you." For the first time the great messianic secret has been openly revealed. This is one of the most dramatic moments in Biblical history. Jesus lets his true identity be known. But look to whom Jesus confesses his identity. This is the moment in history that people have been waiting for thousands and thousands of years, with all their hopes and fears of all the years and Jesus ushers in this glad news through this Gentile, through this Samaritan woman, through this sinful outcast among a nation of sinful outcasts. So, why did Jesus choose the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well? She has found what she came to the well to receive. She has found her water. She has found her living water. She sees truth in Jesus words. Now, her eyes are opened and she sees him as Messiah. When that happens, she abruptly leaves her water jar and runs back to tell the people what she has experienced. Jesus chose the Samaritan woman because he knew she would bring Samaritan people, Gentile people, outcast people, and marginalized people to Him, to God. You see my brothers and sisters, you cannot evangelize and tell the story until you first believe the story. You cannot be convincing unless you are convinced.

The Samaritan woman stirs up the entire town and Jesus sees this throng of Samaritan people coming towards him and he says to the disciples, “*Look around you and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting.*” In other words, do not draw boundaries around the Kingdom of God. Don’t limit God. The very nature of the world’s diversity reflects the nature of God. There is no one people, no one race, no one gender, no one sexual orientation no one politic, no one socio economic status and no one is exempt from God’s grace.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, the time is always now. People all around us are thirsty for the living water that only Jesus Christ can give them. So, who will bring the living water of Jesus Christ to them? I think it is very interesting to note that the woman at the well in her enthusiasm to tell her story to the town’s people loses the shame of her sin. She came to the well in solitude; she returns to Jesus with and in a congregation. She came to the well as one disgraced; now she returns as one graced! And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, “*We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.*” Any disciple who can bring people to God can say, “Mission accomplished!” God will take it from there. The woman at the well became a witness for Jesus Christ. A Samaritan woman with a questionable lifestyle becomes a recipient of God’s grace and

now she becomes a vehicle of God's grace to guide others to Jesus. That is God's grace in action.

So, why would Jesus choose you? I would say, if not you then, who? AMEN.