

Third Sunday of Lent
Sermon for February 24, 2008
Raymond Raney

Exodus 17:1-7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1-11
John 4:5-42

Two weeks ago, as my wife was contemplating the hymns she would choose for this Third Sunday of Lent, she asked: “What’s the Gospel for the 24th?” “The woman at the well,” I replied. This struck me as funny Monday as I began to prepare for this sermon. I can reduce this encounter between Jesus and this Samaritan woman down to five words. I didn’t even give her a verb: just two nouns, two articles and a preposition.

Jesus and the woman are drawn together at a well, Jacob’s well. And at this well, Jesus tells the woman about living water – a spring of water that does not fail but satiates the thirst of all who drink from it.

Water is life. Wells and springs are special places. In Celtic spirituality, wells and springs are sacred places. Wells tap into the womb of the earth where the water of life flows. Springs are thin places where the sacred water that flows through the veins of the earth breaks through the ground of this world and flows into our life. Is it any wonder then that Jesus talks of water that quenches all thirst at a well that dates back to the origins of the twelve tribes, to Jacob. But why are we given this story through the ears of this woman.

After all, she was just a Samaritan, a people who were not considered worthy of association by the Jews. You can tell that by the way she and Jesus talk with each other. “Why would a Jew ask a Samaritan for water?” The prejudice is shared from both sides of the conversation. “You worship what you don’t know, we worship what we know,” Jesus tells her.

Obviously, Samaritans and Jews did not get along. Jesus uses the Samaritans as foils in parables. The Parable of the Good Samaritan was an oxymoron: like jumbo shrimp, military intelligence or government efficiency. The Jews who heard the story of the Samaritan who cares for a stranger and scratched their heads: how can there be such a thing as a good Samaritan.

The Samaritans were not Jews. They were not descended from the Hebrews, though they claimed the heritage of Jacob because of their connection to the land. Back 700 years before Jesus’ time, the Assyrian Empire wiped out the northern Kingdom of Israel and its capital city of Samaria. The army drove off the people and scattered the ten tribes, the descendants of the sons of Jacob. The king of the Assyrians resettled the northern Kingdom with peoples from other conquered lands. This didn’t work because they were not a people of the law, and the Lord sent lions to kill them. The Assyrian king was

advised of the problem, and ordered a Priest of the Jews to go and teach them the law. So the people called Samaritans were absorbed into Judaism – kind of. They would have been the relatives that often are forgotten when the invitations go out for weddings and family reunions, but who show up at the funerals.

And if being a Samaritan wasn't bad enough, Jesus is talking to a woman, something Jewish men were not supposed to do. Women were not considered worthy of conversation, and propriety dictated that this would not go on in public with no others present. That's obvious by how the disciples react to what they find.

“What's he doing talking to her? He must be out of his head. Here, Jesus, you must be out of your head with hunger, have something to eat.”

So while the disciples are preparing high tea, and arranging lady fingers, the woman is becoming the first missionary, the first apostle: she witnesses to what Jesus has told her to her townsfolk. Jesus has not judged her, but told her “all I've ever done.”

I can imagine their wonder at the offer of living water: water that once tasted satiates thirst forever. My take on her response is that she first thinks of it as a labor saving offer: “I drink once and don't ever have to drink again. No more carrying water two and from the well.”

But that understanding shifts and she begins to understand that there is more to Jesus' words than saving steps. What Jesus offers will save her soul.

Her people believe her and petition Jesus to join them, and their reward is that Jesus spends two whole days with them (the disciples must have been really perplexed). Oh that we might know all that went on during those two days; to know what Jesus taught; to know what those people, held in such disdain, must have heard.

But there is more here than sharing water. The disciples are also given a taste of the water of life.

They ask him to eat and drink, but he responds: “I have food that you do not know about.”

It's that woman, obviously, she's given him something. But Jesus replies, “the food that I eat is doing the work of the one who sent me.”

There's a message there for us. What we do with our lives is important. We hunger for life, we hunger for worth, we hunger for meaning. Jesus tells us that if we do the work, if we live the life, if we follow the will, of the one who sent us, we will be filled. We only need to look to what we do and who we are; to seek out what God has in mind for us. We are fed by doing work that feeds us. We are fed by living a life that feeds us. We are fed by doing what gives us meaning.

It's interesting that Paul dwells on life in Christ: not only in the hopes and joys, but in the sufferings.

"We boast in our sufferings," Paul says, "knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us."

A friend of mine sent me a story about a mother talking with her daughter who had gone to her after suffering a painful and sorrowful disappointment. The mother took her daughter into the kitchen and placed three pots on the stove and filled them with water. When they came to a boil, she put a carrot in the first, an egg in the second, and coffee in the third. Her daughter just watched and started to speak, but her mother held up her hand for her to wait. After a time, she placed three bowls on the table and put the carrot, egg and coffee into them. "What do you see?"

The daughter examined the bowls. The carrot had gone soft. The egg was hard. The coffee had turned the water into something else. The daughter looked at her mother with a question mark in her eyes, and her mother gave her a stern smile: "you can choose what you do with your sadness. It can make you soft, make you hard, or you can transform it into something good. You choose."

As Paul says, God didn't choose us because we were perfect, or even good. God chose to send his son to us when "we were still weak. ... Christ died for the ungodly."

"God proves his love for us" as Paul writes, "while we were still sinners – Christ died for us." We are not expected to be perfect. As we pray in the birthday prayer: strengthen us when we stand, comfort us when discouraged or sorrowful, raise us up if we fall.

There's a line in the latest version of the Batman saga when the father of the boy Bruce Wayne helps him up after a particularly terrifying experience. The father looks at the son and says: "So Bruce, why do we fall?" The boy looks at his father, but he has no answer. The father smiles and tells his son: "We fall so that we can learn to get up."

We fall and we repent and return once more to the struggle – working to make the kingdom of God a reality in the here and now.