

Third Sunday of Lent  
March 27, 2011  
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*Scriptures: Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42*

### **Transformed Lives**

The woman at the well is a familiar text for many of us. Maybe you have imagined this scene in your mind before: Jesus standing at a well talking with a Samaritan woman. We idealize it as an image of God's love and compassion. "Be nice to people who are different" we say to ourselves perhaps relegating it to a simple moralism. Nevertheless, this is one of those passages that the more we think we know the more we realize that we need to relearn it. We will not completely understand the implications of this gospel passage until we pay attention to how deeply radical and difficult the message really is. There is much more here than an idyllic scene between Jesus and a marginalized woman. Yes, it is a call for us to welcome the stranger and to stand with those that are marginalized. But a more critical look at this text calls us to the reality that Jesus doesn't just stand with *the other*, Jesus stands with *my other*, *your other*, *our other*.

You know how I often say that in order to appreciate the message of the Bible we have to identify ourselves in the text? Well, in this case I'm going to ask you to stand outside the text. Let's take today a third person perspective. Let us look at this text from outside. If anything at all, perhaps we could take the role of the disciples. They don't have much participation in this episode. They simply went out to buy food to later come back to find Jesus talking with someone. What's important about the disciples is their reaction. "They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman." It was so embarrassing and out of the ordinary that they were even afraid to ask Jesus why he was in such a compromising situation. You see, there is scandal going on here and we should read this gospel portion with that in mind.

I'm going to suggest that in order to read this passage appropriately we have to wonder who we are going to place in the role of the Samaritan woman. It's important because on that depends how we react to that encounter. As we approach from a distance, as the disciples were, who do we see there in open, placid conversation with Jesus? Is it a gay or a straight person? Does the person has a legal status or enter into the country illegally? What about the person's ideas, are they conservative or liberal? Republican or Democrat? Catholic or evangelical? Rich or poor? Single parent, divorced, remarried...? Who is our Samaritan woman at the well? That could very well be the key to this text. What happens is that, whether we like it or not, when we draw lines between ourselves and other people, Jesus seems to have the tendency to be on the other side of that line.

Some of you may be aware of a controversy that has erupted in the last few days. Rob Bell, an evangelical pastor and founder of Mars Hill Bible Church, has just published a book titled "Love Wins." That hardly sounds like a controversial book, does it? But controversial it is. Here's a quote:

*A staggering number of people have been taught that a few select Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.*

From that passage a discussion has been raised about the existence or not of a place called hell. A place of damnation for, essentially, those that don't believe in God. In a nutshell, Pastor Bell is saying that hell, and heaven for that matter, are choices that we live with right now. Hell is not so much a place of unquenchable fire but the desire to live apart from God; it's something you choose to live through. The controversy has been so heated that a pastor of another church was dismissed because he expressed openness to Pastor Bell's thesis. Now, without saying whether or not I believe in hell—I'd rather keep my job for the time being—I think the basic question has a lot to do with our gospel reading for the day. This gospel is offensive because it shatters our assumptions. We assume to know who is welcome and who is not. We assume to know, as Pastor Bell says about his critics, who goes to heaven and who should be in hell.

But Jesus seems to dismiss such assumptions. Jesus seems to say that there is no difference in those that have access to God's love, compassion and forgiveness. There were many issues that separated Jews and Samaritans. Issues of purity, of nationality, and of religion. Each of those issues was a criteria to decide who was part of God's chosen people and one of them has to do with the place of worship. Since Samaritans don't worship in the temple in Jerusalem they were not thought of adoring the God of Abraham and Jacob. But Jesus says that there is not such a difference. It is not about where we worship or how we worship. It is about whom we worship. "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him." The criteria is not about who, or where, or from what place, or of lifestyle. The criterion is about the transformation of the person, the change into a spiritual understanding, the search for God because in doing so we recognize that we need God in order to live.

That's why is important that we define who we are going to put in the role of the Samaritan woman. You see, there is a general assumption that this is an immoral sinner who has had one too many husbands. But nowhere in the text exists an indication of that. In fact, this woman is no different from Nicodemus of whom we read last week. In that other passage, Jesus encounters a male Jewish religious authority. Now he is found with a discredited Samaritan woman. We assume that Nicodemus was simply wrong, while the woman is a lost sinful soul looking for redemption. In fact, one and the other are exactly the same: two people in search of transformation. Two persons in search of light and water. Two children of God who need to transcend their limited, fleshy understandings to enter the immense spiritual realm of God. In the end they are both in need of transformation which is what this passage is about. With both examples we are being called to transform: from darkness to light, from thirst to water, from flesh to spirit. We are called to change our perspective from what we can do to what God can do for us and believe it!

This is true of the highly respected Pharisee and the usually prejudged Samaritan woman, and it is certainly true of us as well.

It is God who has done it in us and for us. Our changed reality in the waters of baptism; our constant invitation and welcome at the table. These are gifts of the transformation that God does in us. New creatures born anew out of his love. Amen.