

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AND JESUS ARE BOTH THIRSTING

What was the Samaritan woman looking for and hoping to find in those five husbands and her present live-in lover? It clearly was not going good for her. She was messing up her life by making bad choices followed by some more bad choices.

The late Pope Benedict XVI once wrote a reflection on this gospel passage. In it he wrote of her, he says: *Through her encounter with Jesus, The woman is made aware of what, in actuality, she has always known but to which she did not always turn her attention. She thirsts for life itself. And all her attempts to assuage this fundamental thirst cannot slake her thirst. There is a deep-seated waywardness to her life and Jesus brings her face to face with it, face to face with herself.*

She fears this. Why does Jesus do this? Not to shame her. We see no sign of that. Nor does he chastise her. His tone is not one of recrimination. Nor does he condemn her for all her poor decisions. Jesus confronts her with the truth about her life. He does this to liberate her. And—to save her, despite her sins, her intransigence, her futile efforts. But here’s an important note about her; she never gave up. And Jesus does not give up on her. She surely failed but she continues to hope. What a wonderful thing and perhaps so unexpected in such a lost person. As it says in the second reading today from Paul’s letter to the Romans: “Hope does not disappoint.” No, “Hope does not disappoint.” But we have to choose to hope.

At the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus will say from the cross those very simple words: “I thirst.” And so He does. He thirsts for what? He thirsts for her. He thirsts for you—and for me. He thirsts for love because He is love and love seeks a loving return. Jesus does not thirst for love in the abstract though. Jesus thirsts for the love that originates and abides in my heart. And in your heart. It is not a sensual love he seeks. The love he seeks is sometimes harsh and even at times full of dread.

Remember how today’s gospel begins. Jesus is seated by Jacob’s Well, the Samaritan woman approaches with her bucket, to draw water and Jesus asks her for a drink. She is a pretty unlikely candidate for him to ask anything. A woman, a Samaritan, an outcast with a checkered past in the extreme. An unlikely source for what he needs from us.

She doesn’t realize it. She doesn’t believe it. But she has something that God truly wants, desires, yearns for—her very heart and the love that abides there. It is valuable to Christ. More to him, perhaps, than to her. And he wants to lead her to that truth despite all her previous bad choices in her life.

In the first reading for today, Moses, acting on God’s word, is able to bring forth water to quench the thirst of the Israelites from the most unlikely of places. A rock. In the story of Jesus with the Samaritan isn’t that what he is doing too? Not a rock in the wilderness of Sinai but life-giving water brought forth from the rocky wilderness of a human life, a specific woman’s life. And if Jesus can do that for one lost soul, He can do that for every lost soul, for every one of us. How can this be? How can the Lord do this? Again, I would like to turn to a short passage from Pope Benedict who died at the end of last December. Please listen to his words, so simple and yet so tellingly on the mark. Listen to how personal they are and yet how universally applicable they are.

Pope Benedict says: *“God loved me first, before I myself could love at all. It was only because He knew me that I was made. So, I was not thrown into the world by some operation of chance...and now have to do my best to swim around in this ocean of life, but I am preceded by a perception of me, of an idea of me, and of a love of me. They are present in the ground of my being.... God is there first and loves me. And that is the trustworthy ground on which my life is standing and on which I myself can construct it.”*

Whether I am aware of it or not I start out from a stance of being loved. So do you. Whether you realize it or not. That is one of the signal truths that we each struggle to believe. But it is the truth. What Jesus does for that woman is to give her an experience of that being loved—despite her past, her flaws, her sins. Despite her hardness of heart. Despite her decisions to go her own way. Despite all that, she has something that Jesus wants and that only she can give.

Jesus thirsts. Jesus knows that we thirst and he has the water that satisfies our thirst. And it can turn a life around—completely. And it does turn this woman's life around. It turned her into the one who begins to spread the message and tell others about Jesus. His love, his grace turns her into an apostle. Just like it did with Saul who became Paul on the road to Damascus. Who knew?

When the woman runs into town she leaves behind her the water jar she lugged out there to fill with water. She is a different person after she meets Jesus. My friends, isn't that why you and I come here each week? To have an encounter with Jesus that will change us, that will sustain us, and that will bring meaning into our lives, and provide us with the Spirit we need to live the life? Her leaving her jar behind is reminiscent of the time the blind Bartimaeus leaves his cloak behind after receiving his sight and who begins to follow Jesus on his way.

Christ's love quenches her thirst—after all the failed attempts. Finally, in him she finds what she has been seeking. Only in Christ does she find what she has been thirsting for. We too will only find in Christ that for which we truly thirst. So let us turn to him. And pray in this Eucharist to encounter him as really as did that woman so many years ago.