

Jesus and the Woman at the Well

March 19, 2017
Third Sunday of LentBy **John F. Crosby**Readings: Exodus 17.3-7; Romans 5.1-2, 5-8;
John 4.5-42

In today's second reading, taken from the Letter to the Romans, we read: "It is rare that anyone should lay down his life for a just man, though it is barely possible that for a good man someone may have the courage to die. It is precisely in this that God proves his love for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Jesus Encounters the Samaritan Woman

The encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, found in the gospel reading for this Sunday, is an eminent example of this prevenient love of Christ for us sinners. There are, of course, many other such examples in scripture, including the calling of St. Matthew, or the prodigal son being received with joyful celebration by his father. But let us consider what is singular about the Samaritan woman.

She has been married five times and is now living with a man not her husband. She is living in what today we call an "irregular marital situation." Some pious persons may be inclined to be scandalized by her and to shun her. But Jesus does not do this, even though he is the one who in his teaching restores marriage to what it was "in the beginning," eliminating the option of divorce given by Moses and branding divorce and remarriage as adultery.

If the Samaritan woman is at odds with the norm of marriage acknowledged by Jews and presumably by Samaritans, she is utterly at odds with the much higher norm of marriage taught by Jesus. If marriage is indissoluble, as Jesus teaches, then she must be a very great sinner in his eyes. And yet at no point in his encounter with her does he rebuke her for her irregular marital status; nor does he make further friendship with her conditional upon her repenting and separating from the man she now lives with.

Instead, he begins by asking her for a drink. St. Augustine says that the Lord "was thirsty for her trust." The Catechism says that he awakened her thirst for God by first thirsting for her faith. Her unworthiness does not stifle his thirst for her trust. He tells her he wants to quench her thirst with the water that "will become in her a spring of water welling up to eternal life," which is exactly how he describes the gift of the Holy Spirit in John 7.38-39.

The Samaritan women may not seem "ready" for such a gift, since she seems hardly able to distinguish between spiritual water and physical water. Jesus may seem to be "casting pearls before swine" by teaching her something so far beyond her understanding. But he is not deterred by her limited understanding, and in fact he goes on to teach her about the true worship of God, saying that it is not tied to a particular mountain or city, but is accomplished in "spirit and in truth." The Samaritan woman may not seem to be a very "spiritual" person, but Jesus is prepared to reveal to her the mysteries of God and the spirit.

And then comes what is perhaps the most astonishing expression of Jesus's prevenient love for this sinner: He reveals to her his identity as the Messiah. When the Samaritan woman mentions the Jewish (and Samaritan) expectation of the Messiah, he says to her: "I who speak to you am he." To whom else in all of scripture does Jesus reveal himself so directly as the Christ, so unambiguously? Does he not by this self-disclosure invite her into a closer intimacy with himself – her, this disreputable, sinful woman?

One may want to add that, while Jesus was spending two days in that Samaritan town, he surely found an opportunity to speak to the woman about her marital situation and to say to her what he said to the woman taken in adultery: *From now on avoid this sinful way of life*. But perhaps he did not have to say this to the Samaritan woman; perhaps the power of “being loved while she was still a sinner” led her to see for herself how she had to change her life. Perhaps she was like Zacchaeus in taking the initiative to tell the Lord what she would do by way of putting her life in order.

The Extravagance of God’s Love

It is, of course, perfectly right to insist that the new life Jesus was inviting her to was incompatible with the life she was leading. But Jesus did not “lead” with announcing this incompatibility, just as Pope Francis encourages us not to lead with it when we announce the gospel to a sinful and broken world. If God approached us by first condemning our sins, we would not feel the full force of St. Paul’s statement, “It is precisely in this that God proves his love for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” But God approaches us sinners by first offering us good things like the gift of the Holy Spirit and a personal friendship with the Messiah. This is what overwhelms us with a sense of the extravagance of his love for us sinners.

The Samaritan woman must have felt this extravagance in her own case. She must have been overwhelmed to realize that she, a sinful woman, was personally sought out by the Messiah, who revealed himself to her. She must have felt the contrast between what she was and what God was doing for her. How then does she deal with “being loved like this while she was still a sinner”? She shares the news about the Messiah with her neighbors, that’s how. She tells them about Jesus and brings them to him. St. Teresa of Avila expresses great admiration for the missionary zeal of the Samaritan woman. This woman seems to know that, if she is singled out by God, she must also be sent out by God. Many in her village come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah through her.

Three Applications

How can we bring the story of the Samaritan woman into our own lives?

First of all, we are encouraged by her story to stop hiding from the Lord in the garden. We are again and again oppressed by the thought of our failures, our cowardice, our wasted time, our mediocrity, our half-heartedness, all of which we feel keeps us from God. Withdrawing into ourselves, we cannot hear what the Lord is saying to us about the blessings he has for us, or rather we cannot believe it. But the truth is that our failures serve to throw into relief the extravagance of God’s prevenient love for us sinners, but not to inhibit that love.

Secondly, we can imitate the way in which Jesus approaches the Samaritan woman. We too should be undeterred by all that repels us in the people we meet. The great Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand says that love does not just respond to the “empirical” condition of a person, that is, does not just passively register everything about a person, the bad no less than the good. He says that love rather has the power to envision all that a person is called to be, all that he or she is meant to become. The one who loves is able to discern the “true self” of the other, and knows how to interpret the failings and sins of the other as not a fully valid part of the other, but as a betrayal of his or her true self.

Surely Christ saw more in the Samaritan woman than others could see; he saw beyond the obvious facts of her sexual history; he envisioned her true self as purified by the living water that he would give her. Her sinfulness was not her true self, but for Jesus it obscured the beauty of her true self. We too need to see “more” in each other, to glimpse the beauty in each other that we have as sons and daughters of the Father. And we need to learn how to awaken the true self in each other.

Thirdly, we can imitate the missionary spirit of the Samaritan woman. Once she experienced how greatly she was loved by God, even while she was still a sinner, she could not *not* speak about it to the people in her town. How then can we not proclaim the Messiah who waits for us sinners at the well, who thirsts for the faith of us sinners, and who is not ashamed to reveal himself to the likes of us?

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FOR FURTHER READING

Br. André Marie, "The Woman at the Well," available at: <http://catholicism.org/the-woman-at-the-well.html>

St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of St. John, #15, available at:
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701015.htm>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##2559-2561, available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive

Allison Weber, "St. Theresa 'Reads' the Woman at the Well," available at:
http://tadghtierneyocd.tripod.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/alison_weber.pdf

IN SHORT . . .

- ***The Samaritan woman's unworthiness does not stifle Jesus' thirst for her trust, and he does not lead by confronting her with her sinfulness.***
- ***Jesus wants to quench her thirst with the water that "will become in her a spring of water welling up to eternal life."***
- ***The story shows that love of God of which St. Paul says, "It is precisely in this that God proves his love for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."***
- ***We imitate Jesus by looking beyond the sinfulness and brokenness of others and discerning in love the true self of each.***
- ***We imitate the missionary spirit of the Samaritan woman by proclaiming the Messiah who waits for us sinners and is not ashamed to reveal himself to us.***