

“A SCARLET LETTERED SAMARITAN”
JOHN 4:5-26; THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT-A
MARCH 23, 2014

It certainly was a shocking question in her mind that Jesus asked of this Samaritan woman in our Gospel lesson today, when he asked her for a drink of water. For after all, as John tells his readers in that very important footnote in verse 9: **“JEWS HAVE NO DEALINGS WITH SAMARITANS.”** Anybody who knew anything about life “in them there neck of the woods” understood that there had been a great deal of animosity instilled in Jews and Samaritans towards each other from the time that they were children.

At the outset of the Gospel lesson, Jesus is sitting down beside Jacob’s well. He is wearied from a long journey that he had taken on foot with his disciples whom he had just sent into the village to buy food.

Suddenly, there is a woman who approaches the well at high noon in broad daylight, with a water jar that she is toting on her shoulders. And I don’t believe for a moment that **THE MEETING BETWEEN JESUS AND THIS SAMARITAN WOMAN WAS A MEETING OF MERE HAPPENSTANCE**, for in the verse immediately preceding our Gospel lesson today we read: “Jesus had to pass through Samaria” (v.4).

What a contrast St. John sets up for between the conversations that Jesus has just had with the Pharisee Nicodemus in chapter 3 and the conversation Jesus has with this Samaritan woman in chapter 4. For all of their glaringly obvious differences, with Nicodemus being a representative of Orthodox Judaism, and this woman being a representative of the very class of people whom Orthodox Jews seem to despise the most--- they both had some very troubling questions that plague them concerning the true identity of Jesus. They had these troubling questions because, as St. Paul reminds us in 2 Cor. 12, “No one can say that Jesus Christ is Lord but by the Holy Spirit!”

And isn’t this what Jesus makes plain to Nicodemus. Jesus cuts straight to the chase when he says: **“EXCEPT A MAN BE BORN AGAIN OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT, HE CAN IN NO WAY ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD.”** And it is the blessed ministry of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is also talking about to this troubled woman, when he says to her: **“IF YOU KNEW THE GIFT OF GOD AND WHO IT IS THAT IS NOW PRESENT HERE BEFORE YOU, YOU WOULD HAVE ASKED HIM FOR LIVING WATER, AND HE WOULD HAVE GIVEN IT TO YOU!”**

Well, here comes this woman to the well at high noon! Commentators have always pointed out that most of the women in Sychar probably went down to Jacob’s well early in the morning, when the heat of the sun would not be so intense upon them as they carried out this daily, arduous household task. Maybe she was coming at high noon, because she too often had been the brunt of their constant gossiping around town. When she arrives, Jesus asks her for a drink of water. Rather than simply giving that drink of water to him, she replies: “How is it that you, being a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman for a drink of water!”

Then it becomes obvious that Jesus is speaking on a very spiritual level, while she is thinking only in terms of the physical world and the physical realm in which she has spent all of her life up to this point.

Jesus says: *“If you knew the gift of God and who it is who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink of water,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water!”*

Here this woman was in the most ideal of all circumstances which any human being might ever finding herself in—she was in the presence of the Holy Son of God who had come to bring his Heavenly Father’s divine salvation to people in this world and she didn’t even know it.

One analogy might be to think of yourself as standing in the checkout line at the convenience store where you have just pumped 15 gallons of gas into your automobile. Rather than paying at the pump with your debit card, you go inside to pay for your fuel with cash because you also want to buy a bottle of water. But totally unbeknownst to you, or to the clerk behind the counter, or to the owner of the store... the very next \$10 lottery ticket that could be purchased is worth \$5000.

If you knew that, even though you may have never purchased a lottery ticket in your life because you are opposed to it on moral grounds, you would be mightily tempted to buy that winning ticket! Ten dollars would be a small price to pay for a \$5000 win.

But the **“GIFT”** that Jesus had come to bring this woman and to all of us who will but receive it from him, is not for sale with our monetary currency. **IT IS A “GIFT” OF GOD.**

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is standing here and asking you for a drink of water, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water!”

“Give me this water, so that I won’t be thirsty again, Jesus, nor have to keep on coming here to fetch water!” Yes, she is still thinking of the physical realm, but Jesus is speaking of the spiritual realm.

Don’t you think this woman was now saying to herself that this Jesus fellow was treating her far kinder than any man had ever treated her in a long time? He was the closest thing to a real gentleman that she ever knew. He was treating her with immense dignity and respect.

Was that all that he wanted from her? Merely a drink of water?

Or did he have something else in mind? Well, yes, he did have something else in mind! What he wanted was her heart, and the same thing is true with you and me in this lovely sanctuary yet today.

Everything was going so very nicely, until Jesus dropped a bomb on her: *“Go and call your husband and bring him here to meet me!” Jesus said to her.*

Hmm... Now what should she do? Do you think that maybe she considered lying to Jesus?

“Husband, husband, no can do! My husband is out of town on business and won’t be back in Sychar till next Thursday!”

But for all of the fear that may have been brewing inside of her momentarily, she just couldn’t lie to Jesus. She wasn’t going to necessarily tell him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but she would at least tell him a half-truth: *“I don’t have a husband.”*

Now the stage is set for Jesus to give her a little better insight about who he really might be. *“You are correct in saying that you have no husband! For you have had five husbands, and the man who are now currently living with is not really your husband!”*

Here is the Good News, however: Jesus wasn’t looking for perfection in this woman; he was looking for honesty. And isn’t this what God has always been looking for in his people and in the relationships that he would dare to forge with them.

What would Jesus do next, if he discovered something about her life that she would just as soon he'd never know? Does Jesus ostracize her, the way that so many other people in the community had ostracized her? Does Jesus yell at her? Does Jesus scream at her? Does Jesus tell her what a loathsome person she was and is because of her horrible track record on marriage? Does Jesus give her one of those "What kind of mess have you now made of your life" lectures?

No Jesus doesn't do anything like this at all!

"Sir she says, I perceive that you are a prophet!" Translation? Jesus I can certainly tell that you are no mere, ordinary man. "My people says that the best place to worship is at Mount Gerizim, and your people say the best place to worship is in Jerusalem. What do you say?"

Here is a woman who is openly admitting that there is a big gaping hole inside of her as big as the moon, which no one else, or nothing else has ever been able to fill. Perhaps she was beginning to understand what St. Augustine meant one day when he said, "Our souls find no rest until they rest in thee, O Lord!"

Jesus replies, "The day is coming when true worshipers will no longer worship in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim. For the days is coming, and now is, when those who worship God must worship him in spirit and in truth!"

What Jesus possibly mean—that those who are to have a direct experience of God's presence in their lives—were going to have to approach him in spirit and truth? Doesn't Jesus mean that we would have to become honest with the Lord God when we come before him?

There is a beautiful psalm that we read here together on Ash Wednesday that I certainly would like to share with you again today; Psalm 32: ***"Blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven and whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night and day your hand was heavy upon me, my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord" and you forgave the iniquity of my sin!"***

"What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul? What wondrous love is this, O my soul? What wondrous love is this that cause the Lord of bliss, to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul, to bear the dreadful curse for my soul?"

When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down. When I was sinking down, O my soul. When I was sinking down, Christ set aside his crown for my soul, for my soul. Christ set aside his crown for my soul.

To God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing. To God and to the Lamb, I will sing. To God and to the Lamb, who is the great "I AM" while millions join the theme, I will sing!" (LSB 543:1-3)

Jesus did not come into this world so that God could love us. God loved us with all his heart long before Jesus was born. But before Jesus was born that love that God had for us had a hard time reaching us because of those three great barriers of our sin, the reality of death, and the constant persuasive evil powers of the devil. Jesus came among us to conquer sin, death and the grave. Doesn't St. Paul put it so beautifully for us in Romans 5: *"God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies of God we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life!" (v. 8-10)*

As I was studying this wonderful Gospel lesson to be preached on today, several weeks ago, I could not help but think of a remarkable book I had read in high school. The title of the book is **A SCARLET LETTER**, written by the great American author, Nathaniel Hawthorne way back in the 19th Century.

The story is set in Massachusetts, Boston, actually. The city was inhabited largely by Puritans, people who called themselves Christian, but often seemed to have much more in common with the Pharisees, who spent a great deal of their time taunting Jesus. Some time they seemed to be much more like the Pharisees than they were like Jesus himself.

At the beginning of the book there is a woman known as Hester Prynne. Yes, she was married but she had come to the New World on a ship that arrived there, several months before her husband, Rodger Chillingworth was scheduled to arrive there. He was so late in coming, he was feared to be lost at sea, not unlike the fears many people throughout the world presently have regarding those 272 passengers and the 12 crew members aboard Malaysian Airlines Flight 370.

She became pregnant. And because Heather refused to name or identify the baby's father publicly, she was sentenced for a time in prison, together with her daughter Pearl. But the father of the baby turned out to be no one less than the local Puritan parson; the pastor of the local church; Arthur Dimmsdale.

He had immense personal struggles trying to deal with the reality of his own sin, but his sermons became much more evangelical in nature, full a lot more with the love and the compassion that God has for sinners in Jesus Christ, than they had ever been before. He was experiencing firsthand the devastating effects of sin in his own life and that of Hester's and his daughter.

At the end of the story, he confesses publicly to his sin and rips open his shirt to all the people in the town square. And now they can see a large scarlet A that was etched into his own chest. Perhaps it was the result of scar tissue from something he had put here with his own knife, to try and ease the immense pain that was in his soul throughout those years.

It is a well-known fact today that many people who are thoroughly at odds with themselves, sometimes cut themselves as a form of self-punishment; but for them, still inside, no relief is found.

Think of all the scars that human beings have inflicted on themselves and others throughout the centuries; some visible and some invisible. People have gained stars in the defense of freedom and seeking to rescue others from harm. But such sacrificial acts bring us peace and freedom for this world only.

Only the scars of Jesus, those scars still visible in his glorified hands and feet, save us eternally.

In this season of Lent, we are to be reminding again that nothing can wash away my sins or your sins, nothing but the blood of Jesus. We remember that "he was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his strips we are healed!"

Those scars are still there: "Rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified! No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight, but downward bends their wondering eyes with mysteries so bright!"

"And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on. And when from death, I'm free, I'll sing on. And when from death I'm free, I'll sing his love for me. And through eternity, I'll sing on, I'll sing on! And through eternity, I'll sing on!" (LSB 543:4)