

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT: MARCH 12, 2023

Well, what did you get out of that gospel story? It is rather long but also rather dramatic. The Evangelist John is also a poet and so much that he writes has more than one meaning. I am going to share some of what I heard, but if you have other thoughts, by all means pay attention to them.

First of all, it is strange for this story to happen at all. It takes place at a well in Samaria, a country that is situated north of Judea and south of Galilee. Today this is part of the Palestinian West Bank and the well is near the city of Nablus. Most of the time Jewish travelers going from Galilee to Jerusalem would take the eastern route down through the Jordan valley and avoid Samaria. It wasn't much different in Jesus' time. Jews and Samaritans didn't get along. While they both claimed descendancy from the Israelite people, they had parted after Solomon and the northern Kingdom of Israel became Samaria. Jews looked upon them as corrupted by their Assyrian invaders.

Into this scene steps Jesus. A Jew in Samaria. Much worse he is a man and is speaking openly with a woman which is a no-no. He asks for water from this woman and requests to use her drinking vessel which would make him ritually unclean. Not politically correct at all!

Take a closer look at Jesus. He is God but makes himself vulnerable. He is a man but requests a woman for help. He opens himself to her and gradually reveals himself as a prophet and then as Messiah and as Savior of the world. He is the human sign of a God who opens up to share the God-self to us.

Now let us look at the woman. In the East she is given the name of Photina. She too changes through this dialog. She begins as a feisty woman. She has probably been hurt and hardened. She comes to the well at noon which is unusual. The women of the town would come early in the morning to avoid the heat of day. She has had five husbands but we are given no explanation. Too many have deduced she was some kind of loose woman. But it doesn't say that and Jesus does not reprimand her or call her a sinner. Perhaps Photina was too feisty for the men who married her and they divorced her. She must have been socially marginalized according to the law. She questions why Jesus would speak with her and, in the course of this, she changes from being a feisty woman to a curious one

to an evangelizer of faith in Jesus.

This text was read by a Muslim scholar. His reading of the dialog was that, of course, the two of them were flirting. That would say something of the humanity of both of them. It doesn't matter. What is evident is that there is a rich intimacy between them. The Son of God enters into intimate relationships with people. This is also suggested in all the talk about being thirsty. Jesus asks for a drink. God asks for an intimate relationship with people. God meets us in the middle of the day and reaches out to us and cajoles us to respond. God knows our brokenness and loves us as we are.

Then the disciples show up, back from shopping in the town. They are hapless in reading the scene. They think Jesus is sun struck and hungry. Jesus explains he has food that they do not recognize. His food is to relate to people and do the will of the Father.

Jesus stays with the townspeople for two days before resuming his trek up to Galilee. No miracles, just love, compassion and care for a woman in need.

So I read that this gospel story theologically reminds us that our creator invites humanity into relationship, but never imposes. This paints God both as vulnerable and thirsty, ever waiting near some well to offer life to those who can listen, wonder and respond. Do you hear this too, or something else?

There is also a message of universality in today's message, coming through Jesus's proclamation that real worship and relationship with God does not depend on place or ritual, but on how people become vulnerable to the Spirit's action in their lives. God's mercy is without limit.

Today Photina may appear to us in many guises. We will recognize her not by her name, geography, or appearance, but by her enthusiastic love and the way she invites us to respond to God's thirst and enjoy living water forever. Like her, all we have to do is respond.

I'm pretty thirsty. Are you? I want to pray with Photina, "Sir, give me this water."

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