

The Third Sunday in Lent, Year A, 2008  
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Today we heard the remarkable story about the Samaritan woman and Jacob's well. It is a story about experience leading to faith. It is also a story about God's unequivocal and unconditional love, given us through our Lord Jesus Christ. But this is a story with something of a twist. On the surface, the story seems strange. There is a cultural warp that we must transcend, in order to have true understanding. We need to know about Samaria, and about the Jewish attitude towards Samaritans. Only in that context can we understand the exchange between Jesus and the woman of the well, and only in that context can we possibly understand the disciples' shock upon finding Jesus talking with this woman.

At one time in Jewish history, the tribes of Israel were united. After the reign of King Solomon, the country divided, and by the time of Jesus, some nine hundred years later, the Jews of the south, where our Lord live, no longer even recognized those of the north, the Samaritans, as being in any way Jewish. There were major cultural differences, following years of tension and conflict, but the biggest divider was a religious one: disagreement on how God was to be worshipped and where sacrifices could take place. As with people that divide over religion today, the chasm was deep and wide. By the time of our Lord, the two groups despised each other with a hatred that was fueled by mutual bigotry. So, to say the least, from a good Jewish perspective, it was unseemly for our Lord to have a friendly conversation with a Samaritan and a strange woman, to boot!

Jesus looked beyond such things as tribe, race and gender, to seek and find the core of a person's humanity. All of humanity are the children of God, and no group or tribe or race can claim a higher place in God's inclusive love. But with this woman, our Lord uncovered a lifestyle that most would condemn as sinful, because of things that had nothing to do with being either a woman or a Samaritan. We must realize that this story might have ended quite differently. Our Lord might have blistered the woman with righteous indignation. He might have demanded that she forswear her sinful ways and repent. He might have simply dismissed her as unworthy of the attention of a righteous man. Instead, Jesus sought her out, and reached out to her, and through their encounter, the woman's life was changed.

This tells us something about God's love – specifically, it is unearned and it is unconditional. We have no claim on God and we cannot demand his favor. On the contrary, God initiates love and gives us his love freely, without consideration of our merit. God's love, acted out, is what we call God's grace, or his favor towards us. There is an old hymn that describes that love. The hymn is titled *Just as I am*. "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidd'st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come." Jesus accepted the Samaritan woman as she was, and transformed her. Like her, we stand before the Lord without a plea, but if we accept him as our Savior, God forgives us and accepts us. This is what the Cross is all about.

Lent is a time for introspection and discovery. It is a time to see ourselves as God sees us, with our doubts, our fears, and yes, our sin. A little spiritual housecleaning goes a long way. Lent is also a time for being more spiritually diligent, diligent in prayer, in religious study, in worship. But these things are acts of piety, and piety carries with it a hidden danger. We should not ever think that piety earns God's favor, or that piety ensures reward. To think that we can buy grace cheapens grace, and in our minds, we make God a lesser god if we make conditional that which he gives us unconditionally.

Like the Samaritan woman, we must realize that God's love is unconditional and it is often expressed when least expected. But when we begin to realize just how much God loves us, and fills us with grace even when we know we don't deserve it, something within us starts to change. When we finally realize God's unconditional love, something surprising happens. We let our defenses down; we drop our guard and set anxiety aside. This woman of the well thought that Jesus would condemn her, both for being a woman of some promiscuity and for being a Samaritan. She fully expected to feel his scorn. When she realized that Jesus knew every detail of her life and accepted and loved her in spite of it, she was, for lack of any other word, transformed. She was set free because the burden of condemnation, from herself and her community, was taken away. She understood that Jesus was the Messiah and that he loved her. For this woman, nothing else then mattered. Jesus loves us just as he loved the Samaritan woman, even though he knows us far better than we will ever know ourselves. If we will let him, he will release us from the prisons we have built, setting the bars of sin aside, so that we can live free.

There is no better way that we can spend the remaining days of Lent than reflecting on how God, in Jesus Christ, loves us, in spite of our shortcomings. If we will do this, then we can let the assurance of Christ's redemptive love empower us to make those changes that will bring us ever closer to our Lord. *Amen.*

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