

3 Lent A – February 24, 2008
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Create in us a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within us.

I love to play with words and double meanings. Most of the time, it's real silliness, but it wasn't for the ones who told the gospel story and John is a particularly adept punster. What may seem to us to be play was serious business because it was through word-play and word-association that people would remember the stories. In this context, a pun is a means expressing paradox in memorable form – the first will be last, the least will be greatest, the light overcomes the darkness, sin brings grace, and thanks be to God, the one who dies lives. Last week we heard John play on spirit/wind; birth/rebirth. This week it's living water; thirst that is both spiritual and physical; he had no food, yet his food is to do the will of the one who sent him. So, with all of this in mind, we approach our gospel.

A stranger approaches Jacob's Well at high noon. He is tired and thirsty. There he meets a woman who has come to draw water. The original hearers of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman must have felt themselves on familiar ground. The scene and characters would have reminded them of another "well"-known story, a romance, lodged deep inside the community's memory. In Genesis the sojourner Jacob comes to a well at high day where he beholds his kinswoman Rachel and, Genesis adds wryly, her father's sheep. He waters the sheep. "Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud." Boy meets girl; boy kisses girl (sheepishly, of course!); boy and girl eventually create a family of tribes, the children of Israel (with a huge assist from Rachel's sister, Leah), that's the way the love story turns out.

In John's gospel the story takes a very different turn. From the first sharply spoken word, the conversation assumes the character of a confrontation that is charged with meaning. He is a teacher overflowing with heavenly wisdom; she is a woman of the world who by now has become hardened to the gossip in her village. Like Jesus, she too is thirsty, but thirsty for something she cannot name.

A story that has paradox at its core requires that one of the parties in the dialogue must be clueless about a disconnect in the conversation, which lends a certain sympathy to his or her attempt to discover the truth. It is like banter between Hamlet and Miss Piggy or Homer Simpson and the Queen of England! The exchange happens on different frequencies. As we observe such a tête-à-tête, we are entertained and befuddled by the resulting confusion.

Keep in mind that there are many kinds of paradox. There is the dark one like that of the high priest who says, "It is expedient for you that one man should die

for the people," but hasn't a clue to the truth he has just uttered, or like that of Pontius Pilate who asks "What is truth?" but doesn't recognize it standing before him in chains.

There is also the paradox of those who are struggling in the night but who are genuinely seeking the dawn, of those who are thirsty but cannot say for what – the paradox of today's gospel. As they talk, they have some false starts and comic miscommunication about women, Samaritans, and Jesus as a gift, but eventually a path to understanding opens. When Jesus offers the woman "living water," she replies that he doesn't even have a bucket. But when she hears of the water welling up to eternal life, she understands enough to say, "Sir, give me this water...so I don't have to keep coming to this blasted well!" (She still doesn't fully get it!).

The story takes an abrupt shift with Jesus' second command, "Go, call your husband." John could've continued the story with some esoteric discussion about thirst for the spirit, but his genius is to shift the story toward what and who Jesus is – saving grace wrapped up in human flesh. Her response indicates that he's touched on a sore point – something the son of God seems to do quite regularly for those whom he encounters. As she blushes, she counters with protestations of innocence and in reply Jesus goes deeper. In that probing, she begins to understand. The conversation shifts to theology and the differences between Jews and Samaritans. As Jesus clarifies that cultic practices have passed away and that all that matters is to worship God "in spirit and in truth." Her comprehension unlocks the doors of faith for her, and she comes to the knowledge that Jesus is not only a prophet, but he is freedom from the bondage of culture, of prejudice, and of judgment – he is walking, talking salvation.

This is a love story after all, for only one who loves you knows you as you are and not as you pretend to be. Only one who loves you knows your deepest desires. Only one who loves you can look at your past without blinking. We Christians can know a lot about real love – not make-believe love – but only because "he told me everything I ever did." We stand alongside the Samaritan woman. On Ash Wednesday many of us bore ashes on our foreheads as a reminder of our mortality – ashes to ashes – and as Willie reminded us a couple of weeks ago, they serve as a reminder of whose property we are. The challenge the ashes and this text bring to us is to be honest before God – completely, fully, brutally, if need be. This Lent are we willing to be honest – completely honest, in the presence of Jesus?

Like our Samaritan sister, we too have struggled to believe and have made some crazy missteps in the process. As she is, we are comfortable with the words of religion, but we sometimes fail to connect them to the living Word – the

person of Jesus. We speak easily of salvation but quantify it, if not in buckets of water, then with blessings you can carry to the bank. We listen to ourselves constantly, but we do not listen to the one who can tell us everything we ever did. We listen to the prattling of televangelists outraged over homosexual innuendo in *Sponge Bob Squarepants*, and who make moral judgments a substitute for salvation, as if we had never heard of God's family, the church. Most of all, we love life itself and expect our technology and our wealth to make it extremely fulfilling. Reality TV shows take a greater importance for us than the revealing of the deepest reality of all that is given to us in Jesus.

At the end of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, most readers would have expected the hero to ride off on a white horse in view of a few baffled Samaritans ("My work here is 'well' finished!" with the sound of the *William Tell Overture* playing in the background) or, like a prophet or a Greek hero, to be taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. Instead, the One from Above, fed by doing the will of his father, chooses to submit to the way of the cross. In just a few short weeks, the one who speaks of Living Waters will say to Roman and Jewish spectators, "I thirst." But once he is dead and pierced, out will flow blood — and water.

Our story today contains many more puns, paradoxes and puzzles – too many for me, or anyone else, to plumb its meaning in such a short time. Let me leave you a last word from that master of double meaning, the poet and preacher John Donne, who concluded his final sermon, "Death's Duel," with this sentence: "There we leave you in that blessed dependency, to hang upon him that hangs upon the cross, there bathe in his tears..." – blessed living waters. So now we hang, awaiting the dawn, and the most hilarious paradox of all – Easter joy. It makes you thirsty, doesn't it?

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