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by Mary M. McGlone

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Nobody would be surprised to hear that the account of the Samaritan woman at the well is called a conversion story. Some will compare her to the woman caught in adultery or other famous women in Scripture. In reality there are many similarities among them all, but they don't necessarily lead to traditional themes of repentance and penance.

If we start by looking at the Samaritan woman as an apostle in her hometown, we might ask about the message she took to her people. After all, she had engaged in quite a theological discussion with Jesus, going from questions about whether he had something better than Jacob's well (tradition) to where people should really worship (liturgy) and ending with hearing Jesus identify himself as the Christ (theology). So, what was her message? "He told me everything I have done." That is all that we hear from her. In discussion with Jesus she had said that the coming Messiah would "tell us everything," but there was no hint that "everything" would be primarily personal information.

What we have in this story is a rather complex encounter in which Jesus first approaches this woman on the level of human need. He asks her for water. But oh, how the simplest things can be complicated! The Samaritans now owned Jacob's well, a symbol of the common roots and tradition they shared with the Jews. But how

could a Jew ask a Samaritan for anything? The Jews had destroyed the Samaritans' temple on Mount Gerizim, they disdained the Samaritans for being backwoods idolaters whose intermarriage with non-chosen people had contaminated the bloodlines. In short, they were antagonistic peoples inextricably related to one another at the deepest level of their religious history. Jesus was taking on all of that with his simple request for a drink.

As the exchange progressed there was great theological discussion about living water, Jacob's importance, correct worship, prophets and the coming Messiah. But what really counted was that Jesus revealed himself to the woman and revealed her to herself. We don't know the extent of their dialogue, we only know that she came to believe he had come from God and proclaimed, "He told me everything I have done."

What's interesting about this in the context of Lent is that we have a conversion story that doesn't focus at all on sinfulness or even traditional repentance but rather on being known and accepted. When the conversation about husbands began, the woman said she had none, and Jesus replied that she had known at least five. But there is no follow-up on the topic. No talk about straightening out her life, no discussion about laws concerning divorce and remarriage, nor about whether she could commune with him in her current state.

She told her people, "He told me everything I have done." One gets the sense that Jesus explained her to herself. The symbolism of five husbands speaks to a person seeking something on a human level. Her discussion about where to worship, about prophets and the coming Messiah showed that she was well versed in the tradition and had real theological questions and religious hopes. But the message she took home spoke of none of that. She had been accepted for everything she was, just as she was. That fulfilled a need that no affair of the flesh or the mind could ever satisfy.

This story is about thirst, about God seeking and finding beloved humanity. Whatever her social status, whether she was the town reject or a popular figure, the Samaritan became an apostle, an evangelizer. In *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), Pope Francis writes, "Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that she or he has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus." That is exactly what happened to the Samaritan woman. Theology, liturgical correctness and the question of who has the better tradition are no more than distractions in the face of

an encounter with Christ. Her interaction with Jesus filled her with the living water (the Spirit) that made her an apostle, one who enticed others into a similar encounter.

The church offers us this story in this third week of Lent and invites us to meditate on the woman and her transformation. It reminds us that our faith is based on a personal encounter with Christ, the one whose effect on us is like cascading water. Water filling us and bubbling over into joyful expressions of being so loved just as we are, that we are impelled to continue the relationship and share it. The conversion revealed here is about focusing on Jesus and God's love, nothing more and nothing less.

After all is said and done, the reading does leave us with a blaringly unanswered question: Did she ever give Jesus that drink of water?

EXODUS 17:3-7

The people grumbled against Moses. Grumbling. Murmuring is another word for it. It's the proliferation of indirect complaints that aim more at socializing discontent than finding a solution to the problem. Now granted, a truly thirsty crowd is going to be touchy. But did they think Moses was hiding a fountain behind his tent for his own use? We might note how they were playing a game of "pin the blame on the leader" rather than addressing God with complaint or petition.

"Why did you make us leave Egypt?" People who talk like that are still thinking like slaves. Moses didn't round them up and drive them with whips across the Red Sea. Instead he led their escape from servitude! And he got them out with pretty good booty. Exodus 12:34-36 tells us that they took the stuff that was theirs, their unleavened dough and kneading bowls, along with "contributions" from the Egyptians which included articles of silver and gold and clothing. We also hear they had animals. They must have looked a lot more like a caravan than a gang of fugitives.

Moses was caught in the middle. God chose him to lead the people, yet every time they got mad, they took it out on Moses. Poor Moses had nobody to complain to except God — everyone else was ready to stone him.

The route of the Exodus was not just a journey from one country to another. That trip could have been accomplished in a rather straight line in much less than forty years. The Exodus pilgrimage was a passage from slavery to freedom, from being no-people to being *the* people of God. They were moving toward faith, a journey that began in those forty years and would be repeated somehow by every succeeding generation — a fact sacramentalized in every Passover celebration.

The desert was a testing ground where the people faced the question of whether or not they could learn to trust God and God's providence. In the process, the people tested God, demanding that God act on their terms to prove that they had not been abandoned or duped in their acceptance of the offer of freedom. Their grumbling about thirst expressed a murmuring doubt about God's care. It was a lack of faith as much as a need for hydration. Moses understood that and rather than send out scouts looking for wadis or wells he turned to God, being sure to mention that the dearth of water was about to have disastrous consequences for himself.

Using his staff, the symbol of his vocation as a shepherd of the people, Moses struck the rock where God promised to be present. From that very place water flowed and God saved the frightened people. God the thirst-quencher passed this round of testing with flying colors. The people however were still in process.

ROMANS 5:1-2, 5-8

Justification by faith is the major theme of the first four chapters of Paul's Letter to the Romans and is at the heart of Lutheran theology. Perhaps for that latter reason the phrase doesn't figure large in Catholic preaching and teaching. The Catechism of the Catholic Church has but two mentions of the phrase "justified by faith," (#818, 1271) both of which refer to incorporation into Christ through baptism. So what do we do with the opening statement of today's selection from Romans?

One way to understand justification is through considering its effects. Paul tells us that justification gives us peace with God, access to grace and a sure hope because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts. Justification, it turns out, was exactly what the Samaritan woman experienced in her encounter with Jesus. His grace, symbolized by living water, was poured into her heart and flowed over into apostleship. Paul says the same of the patriarch Abraham: He was justified by faith. In other words, Abraham's faith in God's promise made him "righteous," putting him in right relationship with God. It also made him fearless. From there, nothing was

impossible. That was a lesson Abraham's descendants forgot as they wandered from Egypt to the promised land.

Justification by faith begins with and depends completely on our receptivity to and our willing dependence on God. Rewording Micah we might say "This is what God requires, only this, that you be open to God's great love." Accepting God's offer of love is what justifies us. It is also what will inspire and spur us to every sort of mercy in relation to others as well as to ourselves. With nothing to prove we will have nothing to fear.

JOHN 4:5-42

We know that the discourses in John's Gospel have multiple layers of meaning, each building on the other. The same is true for his active scenes. During Lent we might approach the incident with the woman at the well as a screen play depicting conversion and salvation through interactions around food and drink and personal and theological discussions. Every line of dialogue and every movement has a rationale and a message — all are open to multiple interpretations. The opening shows Jesus sitting beside the well. The scene is more suggestive than 21st century people may realize as the well could be a place of wooing (Genesis 29, Exodus 2), a gathering place for women and a symbol of God's gifts of water and therefore of life itself. According to Scripture scholar Juan Mateos (*El Evangelio de Juan*), when Jesus sat down at Jacob's well he was doing more than resting: He was symbolically putting himself in the place of the ancient well as source of life. His posture was the first sign of all that was to come.

The time? The sixth hour, the same time of day at which he would eventually be crucified, indicating that this is his hour, the hour of salvation.

Enter the woman with her jug. Jesus addresses her with a familiar tone, asking for a drink. Lacking stage instructions, all we know is that the woman replied ironically, asking why a member of a group who considered themselves superior and too pure to mix with Samaritans would stoop to ask her for a favor — especially one that demanded touching the same things.

Jesus disregarded any hostility in her tone of voice just as he ignored the taboos that should have prevented him from speaking to a woman alone, much less a Samaritan. Ignoring the tradition of enmity, his two-pronged reply challenged her to

recognize God's gifts and who it was that spoke to her. That recognition held out the promise of living water.

That led to the first theological discussion about what Jacob — in other words, their shared tradition — offered. According to Jesus, their tradition offered sustenance for the body, like water in the desert, but fell short of fulfilling the human spirit. Missing the point, she asked him to give her freedom from thirst.

In a very odd turn of plot, Jesus told her to go get her husband. When she stated quite simply that she had no husband, he replied that she had had five and was with one now who was not a husband to her. The explanations of this interchange include the simple suggestion that the woman was a serial adulteress and therefore a known sinner to the idea that she represented Samaria as a whole who had historically worshipped multiple deities along with the God of Israel.

Recognizing him as a prophet, her response led to the theological question underneath their peoples' mutual animosity. She asked about the place of true worship: Was it where the Israelites destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem's still standing Temple? In reply, Jesus went right back to what he had originally said, but presented it in a new way. He wasn't concerned about water or temples, but "Spirit and truth." The hour was coming, in fact had arrived, when outward manifestations would lose their meaning and God's Spirit would well up inside believers

So far, she had gone from animosity to curiosity, to genuine questioning. Now, having heard more, she explained her belief: "When the Messiah comes, he will tell us everything." Jesus simply replied, "I am he, the one speaking to you."

The arrival of the disciples gave her the motive to return to town to tell her people what she had encountered. When it came time to put it into words, she didn't talk about temples or wells or even the Spirit and truth. She said "He told me everything I have done."

Planning: 3rd Sunday of Lent

By: Lawrence Mick

The restoration of the catechumenate mandated by the Second Vatican Council and expressed in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has had significant effects on the process of preparing adults (and children of catechetical age) for baptism. But it has fallen short of its full potential to revitalize our parish communities. One of the major reasons for this failure is the lack of community involvement in both the process and the rituals of the catechumenate. Too often, those preparing for baptism are relegated to their own little group for formation, having little if any regular contact with the larger parish community. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults insists that the initiation process is the business of all the baptized, but many Catholics don't even know what the rite means or how it is supposed to work.

Since we are using Cycle A of the Lectionary this year, there is no question about what readings will be used for the third, fourth and fifth Sundays where the scrutinies are observed. The Gospels for these three weeks are powerful texts aimed at preparing the elect for baptism, but they are also proclaimed to the whole assembly to call them into a similar journey of deeper conversion. If that is to happen, the assembly must be involved in the rite as more than passive spectators. (It must be noted that this will be of limited success unless the elect have been active members of the community so that they are known and cherished by the larger community, but it is still worth addressing.) For example, the community as a whole can be asked, perhaps on the first and second Sundays of Lent, to suggest issues that we need to confront and virtues we need to improve; these can then be added to a similar list from the elect to craft the intercessions for the three scrutinies. Also consider having the elect positioned at various places among the assembly, so that they are surrounded by the people praying for and with them. If you have multiple Masses, consider rotating the celebration of the scrutiny each week, or if you have many elect, you could celebrate the rite more than once on each Sunday so that more of the parish experiences it.

Even if you have no elect, you can still draw on the readings for these Sundays and invite people to suggest topics for the intercessions, so that the whole parish engages in reflection and prayer and self-examination to see what is "weak, defective, and sinful" in their lives that needs to change and what is "upright, strong and good" that needs to be strengthened (RCIA #141).

It will take more than one year's effort to make these rites the powerful celebrations they are meant to be. Start now!

Prayers: 3rd Sunday of Lent

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

As we enter into the Third Sunday of Lent today's readings focus on water and on God's self-revelation to seemingly unworthy people. Those who are in most need of help, who appear to be unworthy, are those to whom life is given: the doubtful, the sinners, the impatient grumblers, the wanderers. We recognize our need for God's grace and humbly open our hearts toward this transforming love.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you encountered the Samaritan woman at the well: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you defied tradition by speaking with her: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you reveal God's love to all who are open to it: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider: Let us pray now for those in need of God's generous love.

Minister: For the church: May all its members be a profound sign of God's love...as a penitent people, we pray,

- For those who are marginalized in any way...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those whose voices are neither heard nor honored...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For places in the world where water is scarce or has become a source of conflict...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who are judged as unworthy, for whatever reasons...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For openness to changing our perception of others...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For the elect who are participating in the scrutiny rituals this Lent...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who are in any kind of need or pain, especially the sick, the dying and the grieving; and for those who have died...(names)...as a penitent people, we pray,

President: God of life, we come to you as people seeking wholeness and fullness of life. We pray for ourselves and for those whose lives are fragile. Help us to not judge others and to be open to all you have to teach us. We humbly ask this in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

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