

Living water

Mary McGlone | Mar. 22, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

Anthony de Mello tells the story of the little girl who asks a boy, "Are you a Presbyterian?" He answers, "No, we belong to another abomination." That's a great starting point for appreciating today's Gospel and how Moses and Paul might comment on it.

John tells multilayered stories open to a variety of interpretations. The way he presents Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman and their respective communities could be a screenplay summarizing the entire Gospel.



First we have the scene: noontime at the well. The characters: Jesus and the woman; disciples and townsfolk mostly offstage. Motivation: Jesus "had to" pass through Samaria. (Geographically, he had an option; the imperative is related to his mission rather than his itinerary.)

Third Sunday of Lent
Exodus 17:3-7
Psalm 95
Opening scene: A tired and thirsty Jesus sits by Jacob's well while his disciples go into Sychar to buy food. A woman comes to fill her water jar.
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8
John 4:5-42

Dialogue Part 1: Jesus asks for water. She notes the irregularity of his request; he's crossing conventional religious and gender boundaries by asking a favor of an unaccompanied Samaritan woman. He claims that what he has to offer is far richer than the water of her tradition. When she asks if he is greater than her ancestor Jacob, he avoids the question, saying that his living water quenches all human thirst.

Staging: As the conversation develops, the woman begins to focus on him rather than the well. She, the Samaritan, now looks to the Jew for sustenance.

Dialogue Part 2: She asks for the water Jesus offers. Knowing what that will entail, he tells her that she cannot appreciate living water without comparing it to what has attracted her in the past: He tells her to call her husband, using the word baal, which can also be translated as lord, master or god.

Staging: At this point, she is obviously the representative of the Samaritans, the descendants of Jacob whose religion was corrupted by the worship of other gods. The Jewish people watching the scene now hear

background music recalling the prophet Hosea, who woos back his unfaithful wife in the desert.

Dialogue Part 3: As a theologian now, the woman asks about genuine worship: Who has the right place and ritual? That opens the way for Jesus to expand her horizons to infinity: There is no right place or ritual or ethnicity; God is the Father of everyone; true worship springs from grace, not any particular orthodoxy.

Final Staging: Embracing the life this teaching offers, she abandons her water jar to go tell her people what she has found and to invite them to see for themselves. On the basis of her apostolic preaching, they come and welcome Jesus, the living water, into their life. In the midst of this final scene, the disciples return from their marketing to discover, uncomfortably, that Jesus is broadening their base, accepting a marginal character as his spokesperson and her people as their hosts.

Continuing the image of a screenplay, we can look to Moses and Paul for their commentary. From his desert experience, Moses would understand the theme of this play to be God breaking open expectations. Whereas humanity wants a tribal god who follows their script, God continually draws us into an ever-expanding realm: the Divine Providence that satisfies every thirst and conquers every fear. Paul would explain that drinking Jesus' living water typifies the experience of justification. That water wells up inside us, bringing peace and the hope that will never disappoint.

Now, in the middle of Lent, these readings invite us to meet Jesus at the well of our own good, but inadequate, faith traditions. We may find ourselves in the role of the woman/theologian/apostle, open to deepening our faith and sharing it with others. We might stand in the sandals of the confused and disconcerted disciples who went shopping and came back to find the Master nourishing foreigners and being nourished in the process. We might also identify with the townspeople who heard from one of their own what they had timidly and secretly suspected: Their well was not really deep enough. That would be devastating news if not coupled with the offer of living water.

Even as we accompany our catechumens in the process of Christian initiation, today's readings remind us that Jesus' mission is ever-expansive. Our every answer is wanting and our denominations risk being abominations if we refuse to drink from any but the wells we know -- the ones we think we own. The living water of the Spirit's truth will continually stretch us. The Gospel will never leave us comfortable, but it will always satisfy.

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