

Third Sunday of Lent
March 19, 2017

Nobody would be surprised to hear that the account of the Samaritan woman at the well is called a conversion story.

But 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 was having quite a theological discussion with Jesus, going from questions about whether he had something better than Jacob's well to where people should really worship and ending with hearing Jesus identify himself as the Christ.

So, are those the things she told her people about? No, she said to them, "He told me everything I have done." That is all that we hear from her. Remember that as she was talking to Jesus she had said that the coming Messiah would "tell us everything," but she had no idea that "everything" would be so personal.

This story starts with Jesus approaching the woman on the level of human need. He asked her for water. A simple request that had very complex implications. The Samaritans in Jesus' time owned Jacob's well, and it was a symbol of the common roots and tradition they shared with the Jews. And this is where it got complicated because how could a Jew ask a Samaritan for anything?

The Jews had destroyed the Samaritans' temple on Mount Gerizim and they looked down on the Samaritans for being backwoods idolaters whose intermarriage with pagans contaminated the bloodlines.

They were antagonistic peoples intricately 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 their conversation 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 not only revealed himself to the woman but he also 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.

The woman's five husbands show us that she was seeking something on a human level.

While 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 had nothing to do with that.

She had been accepted for everything she was, just as the Lord found her. That fulfilled a need that no affair of the body or the mind could ever satisfy.

This story is about thirst, about God seeking and finding the truth of our humanity. Whatever her social status, whether she was the town reject or a popular figure, the Samaritan became an apostle, an evangelizer.

In the Apostolic Exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel", Pope Francis wrote, "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 a real and deep encounter with Jesus Christ.

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 gushing water. The conversion revealed here is about focusing on Jesus and God's love, nothing more and nothing less.