

Being Thirsty

Last week I had the good fortune to spend three days learning about the internment of our Japanese American neighbors during WWII.

It's the sad but true story of thousands of loyal Americans who were placed in concentration camps, separated from their families.

Their homes and businesses were destroyed or sold at fire sale prices; all because of their particular ethnicity.

Adding insult to injury, the tragic story of the internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry is a topic that's hardly ever discussed in our Middle or High schools.

That intentional ignorance creates its own kind of danger, since we can easily repeat evils that we don't remember committing in the past.

At the end of the day, this conference was a great reminder about how we are so often defined by how others see us, and how wrong those judgments often are.

Wouldn't you know it, but "how others see us" is perhaps the central connecting thread throughout scripture.

And it's here today with this wonderful story of the Samaritan woman at the well.

She's a member of a group of people that the Jewish people saw as half-breeds, with all of the contempt and disgust that that name implies.

Think Taliban or Al Qaeda — or Hillary Clinton if you're a republican, or Donald Trump if you're not, and you get the idea.

And our Samaritan is not only a member of this group, but she's also a woman, and not only a woman, but a five time loser at marriage, now shackled up with fellow number six.

She's not only on the outs with the Jewish people, she's on the outs with her own people too.

Going to the well in those days was a community affair, usually in the cool of the morning, but she's there alone, in the heat of the noon day sun.

And small wonder.

No one wants to catch what she's got.

And yet, perhaps because of all of that, she's tough!

She argues with Jesus about who's right in the religion department: her people or the Jews?

But she's also listening carefully.

Unlike Nicodemus from last week, who pretty much gives up trying to get what Jesus is saying, this woman hangs in there with Jesus, and before long, she begins to feel something like water lapping up against her feet.

She begins to see herself not through the eyes of gossiping neighbors or even through the eyes of her own disappointment; she begins to see herself through the eyes of Jesus, through the eyes of God.

And lo and behold what she sees is a woman who is loved, who is whole, who is perfect, just the way she is.

She is accepted, just as she is, by that which holds all things together.

And in that acceptance, there is nothing but joy!

That's what Jesus does to people.

The tax collector, the prostitute, the person covered with sores and disease; when they run into Jesus, suddenly there is welcome, there is love, there is wholeness.

No longer defined by other people's labels, they, just like our Samaritan woman, see themselves as they truly are, beloved children of God.

And there's this about that woman, she's thirsty, but not for knowledge.

She's thirsty for wisdom.

When you think about it, the scene today is really a mirror image of what happened so long ago in the Garden of Eden.

In the garden, the serpent tempts the woman with the knowledge of good and evil; but Jesus invites the Samaritan woman to receive wisdom.

Eve is run out of the garden because the knowledge of good and evil, without the wisdom to use it, creates only pain.

The Samaritan woman, who asks for, and receives, the gift of wisdom, runs with joy back to her town, becoming the first missionary to announce Jesus as the Christ!

She invites everyone to come and see the Messiah, yet, because she has asked for, and received, the gift of wisdom, she doesn't tell them what or how to believe.

She simply shares with them the same marvelous invitation that Jesus made to his first disciples: Come and see!

In other words, it's not so much about "right doctrine" — but about encountering the one who holds all things together.

It's not so much about "thinking right" as it is about embracing the truth of our reality: that we are all of us the beloved children of a loving Mystery in which we all live and breathe and have our being.

And there is this.

By simply urging her fellow townsfolk to "come and see" this Samaritan woman rejects the central mistake of each and every religion.

Each and every religion, each and every denomination, says loudly and proudly: "The truth only lives here!"

Fr. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest, calls this display of spiritual arrogance nothing less than: "group narcissism."

Which is the very thing Jesus consistently rejects every day of his ministry.

It's why he heals the hated Roman soldier's servant.

It's why he stops to answer the plea of the gentile Syro-Phoenecian woman for her daughter.

It's why today he spends more time talking story with this outcast of a Samaritan woman than with any other person in any of the Gospels.

Jesus comes to break down walls; and he implores those of us who wish to follow him to do the same.

Whether those walls are racial, ethnic or religious, Jesus invites us into a life of unity, into a life of spirit and truth.

In his encounter with the Samaritan woman today, Jesus reminds us that we don't worship to be entertained – we worship to get to know Jesus better. Butler Bass, paraphrased.

He reminds us that we don't serve the least and the lost and the left behind in order to earn brownie points for heaven, but because we slowly come to realize that Jesus meets us in **their** faces! Id.

And it's why we take part in Holy Communion each and every week.

Bread and wine, changed into Christ's body and blood, which we then consume, making Christ part of our very being, so that we may become Christ in the world!

Accepting, loving, forgiving, serving.

It's a transformation that occurs slowly and unevenly, with lots of detours and hiccups.

Perhaps that's why the story of faith can only be told in sometimes confusing metaphors, through parables that make us scratch our heads, through hints and glances and stories that don't always seem quite clear.

Because faith is about changing hearts, and only a willing heart, a thirsty heart, can change.

While it's possible to change minds with force and coercion and propaganda, heart change takes the meandering road, which is always the slower, more indirect, the gentler way.

Perhaps that's why, at the end of the day, salvation doesn't depend so much on getting things right.

It depends on being thirsty.

+amen

