

Third Sunday of Lent

I begin again at the well. The water is flowing. Can you hear it? Today's element is of course, water. As last week's was fire and the week before earth. But today, we come to the "life giving water" who is Jesus himself.

Like Night and Day! Interpretations of this scripture passage are like Night and Day! The one that was most common was this: The Samaritan woman comes to the well at noon, at the hottest part of the day since she is ostracized by her community. Everyone knows her history. She has had 5 husbands. She comes to the well in hopes that she might find another one. It is Jesus, though who breaks down the barriers between men and women, Samaritans and Jews. He gives her the gift of new life. This interpretation is about a sinner and a savior.

Night and Day! A number of years ago I read the interpretation of this passage by Sandra Schneiders, a theologian and scholar who looks at the passage very differently. She sees the woman as one of the Joannine symbolic characters, like the Man Born Blind. She is symbolic of the many woman who have come to the well to encounter the bridegroom in the scriptures. She comes in the light of day because she has nothing to hide. Unlike Nicodemus who comes to Jesus under cover of night and who does not come to belief. She comes in the light of day and engages in a theological conversation with Jesus. And she holds her own. This is the longest conversation recorded in the NT and it is a woman who engages with Jesus. And what about those husbands? According to Schneider, they are symbolic of belief in "other" gods that the Samaritans had that do not coincide with the original covenant. In summary Schneider says "The entire dialogue between Jesus and the woman is the "wooing" of Samaria to full covenant fidelity in the New Israel, by Jesus the New Bridegroom" The Samaritan Woman is the first evangelist in John's gospel who will be followed by Martha, Mary and Mary Magdalene.

Amy Jill Levine whose work "The misunderstood Jew" The scandal of the Church and the Jewish Jesus a group of us is reading echoes Schneider. She too points to the "day" of the woman and the "night" of Nicodemus. She too challenges the "sinner" stereotype of the woman. And mentions the story of the woman who had seven husbands, all of

whom died. She says” concerning the multiply married Samaritan, by living with a man not her husband, she violates no legal code. Jesus never says anything to her about her sinful behavior and no one in the story condemns her. The only ones who condemn her are the scripture scholars.” She goes on to say “ There is much to be celebrated in the story of the Samaritan Woman, not the least of which is the depiction of a successful female evangelist.

Night and Day! Well, well, well, I’ve always thought of the story in one way. Can you conceive of it in another way? Whatever the theological and scriptural interpretations are the “bottom line” is that it is an Encounter with Jesus. It’s a conversation, not a debate. Both Jesus and the woman have to hear each other out. At the beginning their words are on two different planes but eventually they merge into one.

One of the details I noted for the first time this morning is that Jesus who is “tired” from the journey at the beginning of the story is “energized”, revived by this conversation with this intelligent woman. As much as Jesus is living water for her, She is living water for him. Well, Well, Well.

So what about you? What are your encounters with Jesus like? Where do they take place? A friend of mine who made the Spiritual Exercises with me was reminding me the other day that he had a favorite coffee shop where he would go and pray and it was there he conversed with Jesus. He also told me about a favorite “watering hole” pub in Boston where he would also meet Jesus. The encounter with Jesus can happen anywhere and everywhere. And can you imagine that Jesus delights in hearing what you have to say? Can you believe that Jesus is energized by you, your love, your life. It’s really a two way street.

You’ve been listening to me long enough. I’d like to invite one of our Elect to share a little of her story with Jesus. I asked her to think about who Jesus is for her and what she has learned about herself through this encounter.

I found a friend, a guide, and father in Jesus.
a father who will feed you, secure yourself. no matter how big
is your sin, his love and mercy are bigger.
a guide who will teach you and show you the way.
a friend who will be always there for you.

About me, I found that it's not enough to be living for myself
and my family.
I have to find my place in the community to give back all of the
things that I have been given for free.
Now, I have a compass, a road map, rules and a destination.
May be I can't sacrifice my life for the good of the world, but I
know that I want to be closer to Jesus every day
and live by his words.