

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

3 Lent  
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Fr. Bill McGinty

**“Living Water”**

Today’s Gospel from the fourth chapter of John, tells the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob in the Samaritan city of Sychar. It is the strangest of encounters and for so many reasons. Jesus is alone. It is mid-day when most people are resting. The woman is a Samaritan, yet despite this, we have a detailed dialogue between the woman and Jesus. They have no right to be together. She belongs to a Hebrew sect that separated from Judaism 500 years earlier. Jesus is a Rabbi. She a woman married five times and now living in sin. What could they possibly have in common?

What comes out of this dialogue is the theme of “living water.” It is a theme found throughout John’s Gospel. Water was so important to Israel. It was the difference between the desert wildness to east and the south and the beautiful green fertile land of Palestine. Water, sun and good soil turned this narrow strip of land into a Mediterranean paradise. Here could be grown the finest fruits, grains and grapes. The grassy hillsides supported vast flocks of sheep and goats.

Yet, Jesus constantly uses water as a metaphor for the grace that comes from seeking eternal life and the Kingdom of God. Constantly he battles against those who take his language literally. It happens with Nicodemus and it happens again with the Samaritan woman.

So what is Jesus saying in John’s Gospel? Surely, it is that: “ if you are prepared to sacrifice your life on this earth, in favor of my teaching, my ministry and the Kingdom of God you will elevate yourself far beyond the successes of our poor human nature. Love, forgiveness, kindness, peace and understanding are gifts of the Holy Spirit which prepare our soul for eternal life of grace.”

Peace, love, kindness and understanding are the things we value the most. They speak to us of family, friends, good times and rest. In John’s Gospel they are hard won through self sacrifice, hard work and faith. John’s Gospel asks the follower of Jesus to go the extra mile.

Yet, Jesus does not speak in generalities. His teaching is very specific. In John’s Gospel, Jesus is very much the teacher. His teaching answers a very particular question. How can we climb out of this quadmire of human existence and experience something better?

People are constantly posing this question to us in different forms:

1. How can we build a better world?
2. How can I grow my spiritual life?
3. How can I be a better person?

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In John's Gospel, Jesus answer is that it is about commitment. If you dare to acknowledge that in Baptism Christ has called you to follow him in service, then that has one enormous pre-condition. If you are to succeed in following Christ and his Gospel, if you are to obtain the Kingdom and become one with God in Spirit then you have to die to yourself. Everyone in John's Gospel from Nicodemus on, speaks of it. Baptism, being born of water and the Holy Spirit, is to put aside the "I", the "me" in our lives.

The story of Jesus in John's Gospel is told in this way. From the moment of his Baptism Jesus' life is a life of service. Whether he is driving out an evil spirit from a demoniac, teaching the disciples or healing a blind man, he constantly reaches out to touch. In that touch he sends his spirit, he gives of himself. "Anyone," he says, "who would save his life, must first lose it."

The climax of John's Gospel is of course the passion, trials and death of Jesus. It is almost as if Christ demonstrates all that he has so far taught. Namely, that God's way, his law, his Kingdom is worth every human sacrifice and that love and goodness will ultimately triumph over all adversity and evil.

Sacrificing your life, dying for a cause is not something that people do anymore. we admire it when it involve young people serving the nation in the military, but we are not so sure when our daughter tells us she wants to become a Sister of Charity and work for the rest of her life in Calcutta.

In the 1970's I worked with three men who did precisely that. The first was a young priest called Michael Scott. He was ordained about ten years when he insisted on being sent to serve as a missionary. He chose to go work in Brazil. Not in Rio De Janiero, or one of the large cities such as San Paulo, but deep, deep in the Amazon jungle. You can travel for days up the mighty Amazon before it forks to the right and becomes the Amazon's greatest tributary the Orinocco.

In 1984 ten years after coming to the mission station at Jaguar Falls, five of Michael's co-workers were drowned in the river when their canoe sank in a storm. 34 years later Michael still works among the Indian children in that part of Brazil. The same year 1974 another priest from our community left to work in Ethiopia in East Africa. His name was Patrick Morin. Again he worked deep in the interior, far from civilization. Pat worked there ten years, till news reached us that he suddenly died of a ruptured pancreas, too far from any hospital that could have saved him.

Lastly, there was Brian Justice, already into his fifties when we worked together in a school in Hampshire in the south of England. One day reading the Provincials newsletter, he pointed out to me that they were looking for volunteers to go work in Liberia on the West coast of Africa. "Why don't you go," I said to him "you have done everything else."

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Four months later in 1988 he left for Liberia. Little did he know that for the next 14 years the whole of that region would erupt into civil war? At its worst he was the one who discovered 400 civilians killed in a Methodist church after a night of gun fire and violence in the city of Monrovia in 1994. Today Brian works in Tanzania in East Africa, he is 80 years old.

Commitment takes many forms. Jesus does not ask any of us to sacrifice our lives in such a way, but he does ask us to become fully committed to Baptism, the Gospel and our faith. "I have given you all you need to live the life of grace," his Gospel tells us.

There is something very paradoxical about the fact that the woman by the well and the Samaritans end by believing in Jesus and his words as Messiah. And yet, we who have spent a lifetime hearing the Gospel, reading the scriptures, find it so hard to go that extra mile and commit with heart and soul to the role that Jesus wants us to play in his saving ministry.

In this season of Lent the image of Jesus as Savior, is constantly before us. It appears again in Paul's letter to the Romans in our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, "For while we were still weak at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."

Paul's words are for us a constant source of inspiration. No matter how bad things get in our lives no one can take away the fact that Christ died for us.

That fact changes everything in human destiny. Once Christ died for us everything in our life becomes possible. When the grace of God floods into our life such that even the humblest achieve enormous results in his service.

In Lent today's readings want to place us sitting by that well in Samaria. Instead of the poor Samaritan woman being confronted by Jesus, it is us, you and I. When he asks for a drink, it is us he is asking. It is to us that he says the words: "If you but knew who it is that says to you 'give me a drink' you would receive 'living water.'"

But, we have heard his words, and we do know who he is. We have received living water. "What now?" should be our response? How can we use what we have received? How can we see Jesus and his word as gift in our life and turn that gift into his Kingdom.

Lent calls us to say "No" to ourselves and our own needs and instead begin to think about giving back to God, that his sacrifice, his kingdom may grow.

Amen+

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