HOMILY LENT SUNDAY 03 - A
"The Samaritan Woman - Freed by the Truth"
(Exodus 17:3-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42)
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Are you thirsty for more, for all that life has to give?

Jesus alone can quench our thirst and give us the fullness of life.

In 1971, at the Oblate Scholasticate in Battleford, Sask., my spiritual director, Adam Exner OMI, asked me to tell him my story. In two sessions, I talked for over four hours, the first time I had ever told someone else my whole story. He then pointed out that I needed to work on my relationship with my father, and told me to pray with Isaiah 43 only ("I am precious and honoured in God's sight, because God loves me") for one whole month.

That experience of "telling my story" to my spiritual director was a turning point in my life. I felt accepted and filled with hope for a better future. Praying with that scripture passage was also transformational. I who had tried for so many years to earn my father's love (and implicitly God's love as well) now was confronted with the powerful liberating reality that I was precious in God's sight, not for what I had done, but simply because God loved me!

So it is in today's gospel. A woman at a well experiences a spiritual director, Jesus, who hears her story, speaks words of hope to her, and that encounter transforms her life.

The Samaritan woman is a no-body, a Metis, shy, ashamed of her broken marriage, five failed relationships and her common law situation. Her situation can be compared to that of the Israelites in the first reading. They had experienced both liberation from slavery in Egypt and the theophany at Mt. Sinai where they were given the Ten Commandments. These were two spiritual highs, extraordinary experiences of God working in their lives. Yet now here they were, thirsting for water in the desert, feeling only the absence of God, wondering if God was with them or not. And so Moses had to intervene, and they were given water miraculously, water from a rock to quench their physical thirst.

The Samaritan woman also had faith, and belonged to the Samaritan religion. Yet despite her faith and her religion, her life was a mess. Feeling shame-based, isolated, outcast, she goes to the well at noon so no one will see her, and encounters Jesus.

Jesus, the Lord of all creation, puts himself in a position of want, need, and vulnerability. Jews would never speak to a Samaritan; a sinner; a woman in public, about religious matters. It is as if Jesus is blind to colour, race, religion and social status. With overwhelming gentleness, love and compassion, he breaks all social norms and asks her for a drink. He thirsts for her, for who she really is, and asks her to "tell him her story". At the same time, he thirsts for her to come to know him for who he really is - the source of real life, of living water.

Little by little, and not without some denial and defensiveness on her part, she reveals her "inner self" to him, and comes to know who he is in a gradual, beautiful progression. First she calls him a "Jew", then "Sir", then "greater than Jacob", then "Prophet", and finally confesses him as the "Messiah, the Christ".

In this encounter with Jesus, she experiences God's forgiving love which contains both unconditional acceptance of her as she is, and unlimited belief in whom she could become. This unconditional love is slowly revealed in this story first as "the gift of God", then "living water", then "eternal life", and finally, "salvation". This experience of God's unconditional love, of her truth being known completely, accepted and forgiven by Jesus, heals and transforms her. The woman experiences the living water of an intimate, trusting, loving relationship with her God. She forgets about her water jug, runs to town unashamed, and announces to all "come and see someone who knows all about me, and still loves me." She has gone to confession, has done Step five, and now becomes the first evangelist – the very first person in the gospel of John to spread the Good News that Jesus is the Messiah and Saviour!

The townspeople respond to her invitation. In contrast to the hard-hearted Jews, they come to believe in Jesus as the "Saviour of the world," and beg him to stay with them, which he does. St. John, in this passage at the beginning of the gospel, has given us a model of healing and discipleship, of following Jesus, and she is a woman, a Samaritan, a no-body. How great and mysterious is God's love.

Once again in this gospel we see that Christ is the fulfilment of what the Law could only promise. Real worshippers are those who worship God within a new relationhip that could be encompassed by neither Judaism nor the Samaritan religion.

Anthony, a young seminarian, prayed with this passage on a retreat. He followed the instructions of hi Jesuit retreat director to put himself into the passage and try to experience it for himself. He is a workaholic and co-dependent, with a devastating experience of failing at a particular employment in his past, and suddenly saw himself as the Samaritan woman. When Jesus asked him to go and get his spouse, he realized that he was struggling with four or five character defects, such as false pride, envy, lust, control, and phoniness. He was being confronted with the truth of who he was. In prayer, he realized that perhaps he was just beginning to worship in "spirit and truth", the kind of prayer that God really wants of us. We have nothing to hide from Jesus; with him, the truth will set us free. He was filled with excitement - perhaps in this kind of prayer, facing his own inner self, his deepest truth, he was being set free, filled with living water, rather than turning to those false gods that had so controlled his life before.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is our own Jacob's well – here we meet Jesus who listens to us through the Penitential rite, who reveals God's love to us through the Word, and who then gives us that food of eternal life through the Eucharist. We are slowly being transformed into the Body of Christ, and empowered to go out and, like the Samaritan woman, spread the Good News that God is in our land.

Imagine how God wants, and can, work in your life, to transform you into a renewed, fully alive, forgiven and healed disciple. Will you let him quench your thirst, and fill you with eternal life, during this celebration, during this time of Lent?

<u>"Water Jug Ritual"</u>
Hand out a piece of blank paper to each person. Have them hold the paper over their heart during the penitential rite, crumple it up during the prayer for forgiveness, and keep it until after the homily. Then invite them to come up, put the paper in an empty water jug by a pail of water, then place their hand on the bible or lectionary for a moment of silent prayer to God.