

Exodus 17:1-7

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

Psalm 95

Just a couple of weeks ago we celebrated the beginning of the season of Lent by observing Ash Wednesday. On that day during a service of Holy Eucharist, we were reminded of our mortality when a priest placed ashes on our foreheads in the sign of the cross. The ashes remind us that we are dust and that we will return to dust. The cross reminds us that we have been claimed by Jesus through his death on the cross and his resurrection and that God loves us.....no matter what!

In the last few years, there's been a growing trend toward a phenomenon called "Ashes to Go" in which priests get out in the streets where people are and offer this reminder to them.....no liturgy, no Holy Eucharist, no requirement for repentance.....just a meeting of a representative of Christ with people in their daily routines. There's been some controversy among liturgical purists about whether or not Ashes-to-Go is an appropriate thing to do. It requires nothing from the person receiving the ashes, but it requires an outreaching of a priest.....a priest being willing to engage people where they are.....literally as well as figuratively.

The story we heard this morning about the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is exactly the same scenario. Jesus goes out into the world and engages a woman where she is.....in her daily routine. This woman didn't go seeking Jesus. This woman didn't feel a contrite heart about her lifestyle. She wasn't looking for forgiveness. She was going about her daily routine and minding her own business.

We know some things about her even before Jesus begins to speak. We know that she's an outsider in Israel just because she is a Samaritan. The practicing Jews worshipping in Jerusalem considered the Samaritans to be outside the structure of what God had created in the Chosen People. They weren't doing it right. The Samaritans had historically intermarried and had dabbled in worshipping pagan gods and they worshipped on Mt. Gerizim instead of Jerusalem. They were considered 'less than' by the pure Jews, but they claimed to be descendants of the lost tribes of Israel and they had possession of Jacob's famous well. Their territory nestled up against the west side of the Jordan River..... a place known as the West Bank in the 21st century. If you were a Jew travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem or vice versa, the custom was to cross the Jordan River at the start of your journey, follow the Jordan River on the east side of

the river in Jordan and then cross it again to return to Jewish territory to avoid Samaria. That was extremely inconvenient, but no self-respecting pious Jew would venture into hostile.....and perhaps even enemy.....territory. It simply wasn't done. So this Samaritan woman knew how much of an outsider she was.

When she comes to get water for her household, she doesn't come in the early morning with the rest of the women in her village. She comes alone. Fetching water was a woman's task and women living near one another used that time for socializing.....for catching up with each other, laughing together, perhaps gossiping together, and caring for each other. The woman we meet this morning is excluded from this ritual with the other women. Being at the well in the heat of the day is most unusual.

How many of us can relate to this Samaritan woman.....this woman who is convinced that she is 'less than' everyone else? Maybe for us....when we feel 'less than'.....it is some sense of guilt over something that we said or did that we can't release. Maybe it's something in our lives that we know would bring down wrath upon our heads if it were public knowledge. Maybe it's just a nagging feeling of always feeling that we are left out.....left out of our families or left out in our work places or left out at school or left out among the people we want to be our friends. All of us can identify with this feeling of being left out when we want so much to be included. We seek approval. We want acceptance. We want more than anything to belong, but we dare not tell anyone who we really are. Maybe we stay away from church sometimes because we don't feel comfortable there.....wondering if anyone.....or if the church itself.....is looking down on us. We all know some things about this Samaritan woman that are just like us.

And we know some things about Jesus as well from this encounter. Once again he is crossing all kinds of boundaries.....geographical as well as social. He didn't take the long route around Samaria to get to Galilee. He took the direct route which took him into hostile territory. His disciples leave him to go to the nearest town to get food, so Jesus sits down alone by the well. And this isn't just any well. This is Jacob's well.....the one that Jacob drank from and fed his flock from.....the one that he gave to his descendants. When the Samaritan woman comes with her bucket, Jesus asks her for a drink. Jesus is breaking all kinds of rules here, too. Men do not speak to women in public.....especially women who are not part of their family. And they do not engage Samaritans.....period.....in conversation. And they don't ask favors from people they consider to be enemies. But here is Jesus...breaking all kinds of rules. What he's doing is *not* appropriate.

But here is Jesus at the well.....starting the conversation with this woman who has no name. He paves the way for her by asking her to give him a drink. He wants a favor. He has no bucket or cup and everyone knows it's completely forbidden for him to drink from the same vessel used by a Samaritan! And yet, he doesn't seem to care. He makes himself vulnerable in this

way. He meets her where she is and tells her what *he* needs. He requires nothing else from *her*. And she isn't shy. She answers back. There must have been something in Jesus' willingness to be vulnerable with her that made her feel safe in talking to him. It must have startled this Samaritan woman to be face-to-face with this Jewish man who treats her as if she's somebody.

When Jesus tells her about living water and she asks for some, Jesus tells her to go call her husband. It is then that she confesses that she has no husband and Jesus tells her all about her marital history and her current living situation! He doesn't chastise her for these facts about her life. He simply confirms that she is telling the truth. Sometimes what Jesus *doesn't* say in this encounter is just as important as what he *does* say. And then she begins to wonder.

Acknowledging Jesus as a prophet, she begins to speculate that perhaps he is the Messiah that she knows is coming to the chosen people. In a rare moment.....and for the first time.....Jesus confirms to her.....to this 'nobody'.....that he is, in fact, the Messiah that Israel is waiting for. This woman reveals her true self to Jesus and in return Jesus reveals his true self to her. It's the first time in Scripture that Jesus identifies himself completely. He didn't do that with Nicodemus. And he didn't do that with his own disciples and faithful followers. He did it with this no-name Samaritan woman who was simply going about her daily routine and minding her own business.

When it sank in.....when it dawned on her who she was talking to and who was talking to her.....she took off like a shot.....forgetting her status as an outcast in her world and shouting the news to everyone she could find. She was instantly transformed.....instantly born again as a new person. She didn't behave like an outcast. She had been claimed by the Messiah in a chance encounter that changed her forever. This is a very different experience from the one Nicodemus had. Nicodemus was coming from a position of social and religious power. He was drawn to Jesus, but much too secure in his current status to risk very much. The woman at the well came from a position of lowly social status.....an outcast really.....and she had nothing to lose. Having nothing to lose meant that she was ripe for the harvest.....and was available to be claimed by Jesus.....who did just that.

When we stop to think about it, Jesus and the woman at the well seem a bit like Ashes-to-Go. Jesus went into foreign and perhaps hostile and enemy territory where he didn't belong.....at Jacob's well.....engaged in conversation with an ostracized woman of questionable character.....to remind her that God loves her.....no matter what.

The priest with the ashes is simply following in Jesus' footsteps..... maybe by going to the Metro station, or the bus stop or the sidewalk in front of a busy restaurant.....places where a priest doesn't belong.....to bring God to people wherever they are and to remind them that they are mortal and that God loves them.....no matter what.....and that Jesus offers salvation

to everyone through the cross. No priest ever knows how transformative those ashes on the forehead might turn out to be.....but God knows!

There are a number of remarkable things about this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Even if we don't have a bucket, if we keep coming to the water in this particular well.....the Word.....we will never get thirsty. Every time we come to this well, we will get what we need. Every time we hear this story, it speaks to us in a new way because we are in a new place in our own lives. The situations may change, but the message remains the same.....year in and year out.....the last millennial and the present moment and the future that is yet to be: God loves you.....God accepts you.....you belong in God's family.....no matter what!!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.