

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Another long Gospel reading this week from the early chapters of John's Gospel. These are wonderful, deep texts, that have been used since the early church to introduce new Christians to the faith. I want to focus on what Jesus is up to here both as it relates to each of our lives individually, but then also in how we relate to one another and especially to people we may have "written off" for all kinds of reasons.

I think it's pretty clear that in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in last week's Gospel the discussion of "new birth" and "being born of water and the spirit" was about baptism and the new life it brings in making us part of the body of Christ. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, though, so definitely one of the insiders when it comes to how the Israelites thought about their connection with God. The Pharisees, I like to say, were the good church people of the day. They were the ones most focused on observing all the rituals and practices of the faith. Of course they got a little snooty about it sometimes, and looked down on others who weren't as observant as they were. But for all of their flaws, they were serious about their faith, serious about their relationship with God. So Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about the nature and importance of baptism seems only right and fitting to us.

But then we have this Samaritan woman in today's reading. And she is the polar opposite of Nicodemus. That's really important to understand in order to appreciate the radical nature of what Jesus is up to here. She was one of *those* people... I'm a little at a loss for how to communicate what the equivalent of that might be for you, because of course you are modern, enlightened, progressive people who don't have prejudices or biases about people who are different from you, am I right? I mean not that you would dare to admit out loud. I'm the same, at least that's how I like to think of myself. But I know if I'm honest in my self-reflection that I have absorbed the assumptions of our dominant culture, and I make conclusions about other people based on their ethnicity, what kind of car they're driving, or how they're dressed, especially if they wear baseball caps with political slogans on them. So maybe it will help just to observe that in today's Gospel reading, Jesus is in a bad neighborhood interacting with the wrong kind of person, the kind of person his mother probably taught him to avoid, assuming that she was not in fact sinless, as our Roman Catholic friends have insisted. As one of my colleagues pointed out in our text study this past week, Jesus didn't have to go there. Yes, he was coming from Judea and going to Galilee, and Samaria is between Judea and Galilee. But if you pop over the Jordan down in Judea and then pop back over further north, you can avoid Samaria altogether, and lots of people apparently did. So I think it's safe to assume that Jesus was in Samaria because he meant to be. And by extension, he was talking to this woman because he meant to.

We need to take a moment to talk about who she was. And the text is full of clues about that. First, she is at the well at noon, the middle of the day, when nobody goes to the well. She was neither a mad dog nor an Englishman and yet she was out in the midday sun. But why? Well, we learn from Jesus' conversation with her that she has had five husbands, and she is currently living with a man who is not her husband. Now we don't know how she came to have five husbands, whether she was particularly unfortunate and they all died, or whether she was particularly unfortunate and they all divorced her without cause – which a husband had a right to do, though a wife did not – or whether she had given all of her husbands good cause for

divorcing her by being unfaithful. We don't know. But the fact that she was at the well at noon strongly suggests that she was shunned by the other women of her community and that she had to go there at a time when she would not be verbally and maybe even physically abused. Whatever the reason, and whether justly or unjustly, this woman was an outcast, living on the margins of a group of people, the Samaritans, who were shunned by their neighbors, the Judeans and the Galileans. And good, respectable Judeans and Galileans, especially religious leaders, do not associate with people like that. This woman knows that, and so when Jesus speaks to her, she is as surprised as anyone. And when he reveals that he knows her life story, and is still talking to her, well she is blown away. "Aren't you supposed to be telling me that we Samaritans worship God the wrong way, in the wrong place?" That's another way of framing her question to Jesus. But Jesus doesn't focus on those religious differences. Yes, salvation is from the Jews, he tells her, because that's how God chose to do it, but that is not a reflection on the relative worth of Samaritans and Jews. God wants to be connected with all people in spirit and truth, and is not interested in perpetuating petty, divisive arguments that only serve to keep people separated from each other.

How does this story connect with us and our lives of faith? What does it say about our way of worshipping God as Lutherans, with our emphasis on liturgy, hymnody, and sacramental theology? I think that at minimum it means that if all those things are done and attended to with the goal of connecting us to God in spirit and truth, conveying the promises of Jesus to fill us with abundant and everlasting life, well then we are probably on the right track. If, on the other hand, we use those distinctives about our faith practices as instruments for division, for determining who is worthy and who isn't, or if we decide that Grace is only for certain kinds of people, those who appreciate the finer things when it comes to music and liturgy, for instance, then we might be missing the mark. Jesus has bigger fish to fry, as the saying goes.

What Jesus did in his encounter with the Samaritan woman, was offer her the gift of life in all its fullness, life that transcended her mundane chores, life that is not burdened by her past, life that connected her to God in a deep, compelling, and genuine way, and a gift that by extension may have opened the possibility of reconciliation and reintegration into her community. She had never heard such good news, and she couldn't help sharing it with her community, in spite of their past history together.

And that, sisters and brothers in Christ, is the goal of our life together here at Grace: offering in Jesus name the promise of life that transcends the mundane realities of life in our time and place. That is the focus and purpose of our rich theological, musical, liturgical, and sacramental tradition. But let's not forget that that beautiful package is just that, a package, a wrapping, for the even more beautiful treasure of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ, a treasure that is for all people, people like us and people very different from us.

May God grant us the grace for such clarity of mission. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.