

The Woman at the Well – March 15, 2020 Sermon

I'm particularly fond of these readings from John's gospel for Lent. In my last life I served as a Director for the Rite of Initiation for people who wanted to be baptized or received into the Roman church.

This reading, as well as the next two weeks', are used as a final preparation to being baptized or received at the Easter Vigil.

Lent is the period of time that we assess how we are doing in our relationship with God. In today's reading, the Woman at the Well helps us to see how our personal choices and failings have kept us from God and each other.

Jesus has entered Samaria – the land of the Jews' enemies. (A note on the Samaritans: When the Israelites were taken into exile, the Assyrians only took the upper echelon –those that could contribute to their society. They left behind the poor and the unlettered. People from other countries were brought in and they intermarried. These people were the Samaritans They were only half Jews and tainted.)

So, Jesus sends his disciples into town while he stays behind. A woman has come all alone, to the well to get water to take home. Jesus speaks to her. It wasn't appropriate for him to speak to her alone, much less speak to a Samaritan woman. You see, Samaritan women were viewed as especially unclean by the Jews.

Jesus asks her to give him a drink of water. She recognizes that he's a Jew and she is amazed that he's speaking to her. She asks him: Why? They have a brief discussion on the differences in their beliefs. She pointing out that the living water is at Mt. Gerizim and Jesus claiming that he is the living water.

It is clear that this woman is an outcast in her community. Women didn't normally come to the well at high noon. The heat would have been suffocating. She came at that time exactly so that she would not encounter anyone else.

She was not acceptable to the other women in the neighborhood and by coming at that time she could accomplish her task without being berated or shunned by them.

She protected herself from the abuse she would have received from the community. She had made choices that separated her from her people. Her life was lonely and fractured due to those choices.

While engaging in conversation, Jesus instructed her to go get her husband. She admits that she's not married. Jesus knows, but he puts her truth out in front of her, stating that she's currently living with a man who is not her husband, although she's had five husbands already.

We don't know the circumstances of her history – had she been divorced by the previous husbands and cast aside? Jewish law only allowed five marriages. Was she living with this man now because it was the only option for her survival? We'll never know.

What we do know is that Jesus reached out to this woman and told her not only her truth, but his truth – that he's the Anointed One.

But, despite her human failings, bad choices, embarrassments and her communal situation, Jesus uses her to spread his truth.

Not a Jew, not a friend, but an enemy– a Samaritan and a Samaritan woman at that! Jesus chooses an outcast to spread his message – not his disciples, but a female outcast.

He has given her status in her community once again. When she tells the neighbors what Jesus said, they believe her and came to see Jesus to know for themselves.

There's a series that's new this year on Netflix. It's called "The Messiah." Has anyone seen it? What attracts me to it is the way the man who's being called the Messiah sits with the people he encounters. He seems to know their secrets – those things which have caused them to be cast aside from others in their lives.

There's one character in the story line that made a choice some years before that is eating away at his soul. He's angry, drinking too much, been cast out by his wife and eventually by his job. In the final episode for this season, this man is in an airplane with the so-called Messiah.

The Messiah character is encouraging him to acknowledge that he made the wrong decision and needs to be contrite. The other man is having flashbacks on his actions and suddenly when faced with his own mortality, he cries out that he's so sorry.

This is the image I hold of Jesus who long ago walked our earth and how he encountered people. Just like the woman at the well – he listened; he looked into her heart and saw her truth. What I'm anxious to now see is when the next season airs; will the man take the message and make a difference in the lives of others, like the Woman at the Well did?

You see, I do believe that everything we experience – the good and even the bad caused by our own choices and by the choices of others can make a difference. We have a choice.

We can use our life to help others and bring light and life into them, or we can keep them in the dark and like that character in the Messiah series, turn our lives into chaos through workaholicism, alcoholism, drugs, overeating, abuse or being filled with anger and hate. The choice is ours.

A young boy named Robbie Gay, from Palm Coast, Florida understands what it's like to be cast aside. Before his adoption by Maria and Charles Gay, he was severely abused, having been hospitalized twice with severe brain injuries. He understands what it's like to not be loved – not accepted.

Robbie's adoptive parents saw Robbie's heart and showed him his truth – that he is loveable. This love has changed Robbie.

He seeks to adopt as many old dogs and those seemingly unlovable by people as his parents will allow. Robbie says that he knows what it's like to not be loved and he doesn't want any of his dogs to ever feel that way.

He feels so strongly about this that he held one of his dogs when it had to be put to sleep. He held the dog until it had died. He said he wanted the dog to know it was loved until the end. Then he broke down and cried. Tears he had not been able to release before.

When Robbie grows up, he wants to adopt older children. He wants those children no one else appears to want and love. It is his mission that they will know that they are loved too.

In his young years, Robbie understands that he has choices. He has chosen to practice compassion on these older dogs until he's an adult and can also extend that compassion on children. He understands that he can use his experience to hate, or he can use it to help. He has chosen to help.

With this reading from the Gospel of John, we're called to reflect on our personal journey – what choices have we made that separate us from God and from those we love. Theology and scripture interpretation have their place, but for me, the most important thing in this world right now is for us to recognize the incredible need for love and compassion in this world.

It begins in our personal lives, extends to our church community and country and further into this world – for all of God's created order.

So I challenge you to join me on this Lenten journey and beginning with this text, ask yourselves: Where are my personal failings? Where have I failed to use my life experiences, the positive ones and those painful ones, to help others? What is God calling me to do to make a difference in the life of someone else? AMEN.