

March 27, 2011, Third Sunday in Lent

John 4: 5-42

Food and Drink

A friend of mine recently posted a video on Facebook. It shows a man who lives in India who quit his job at a fancy hotel in 2002 and has spent his life since then feeding and caring for the poor and the destitute.

Every day he fixes meals for starving people and takes it to them. And he doesn't stop with just feeding them. He also gives them haircuts and bathes them and cares for them, hugging them and rubbing their emaciated legs and arms.

He says the food gives them physical nutrition and the care gives them mental nutrition and helps them to feel that they are human beings.

He sees no difference between people, saying that "we all have 5.5 liters of blood."

He says that the purpose of life is to give, and he thinks that everyone should know the joy of giving the way that he does.

Now, it could stop there, and it would be enough to think of him as another Mother Teresa, being in ministry to the poor and trying to make some small dent in the massive poverty of India. But there's more.

This man is a member of the social class called Brahmins. In Indian society, there are defined caste lines, separations between the socioeconomic classes of people. The Brahmins are considered the "priestly class", that is, the wealthy and elite, the privileged members of society who are educated and upper crust.

The Brahmins are not supposed to have anything to do with the poor and destitute. They are taught that to touch the poor is to be contaminated and unclean. The poor are considered to be "untouchable."

In Biblical times, Jesus often criticized the Pharisees. The very word "Pharisee" means "set apart". They were not the priests, but they were the leaders, the people who tried to keep every one of the hundreds of Jewish laws, and they did that by keeping themselves apart from the common, lower- class people, and especially apart from people with the skin diseases called leprosy and those who were not Jewish.

Many of the Jewish laws had to do with staying “clean” and uncontaminated, and they also included the methods of restoring oneself to purity if one has become unclean. Touching a dead body made you unclean. Touching a menstruating woman did as well. Lepers being approached by others had to shout out “Unclean, unclean,” so that they would not contaminate others who might touch them without knowing of their disease.

Associating with gentiles---non-Jews---also made people unclean.

We see that in the story of the Good Samaritan. A priest and a Levite both passed by the victim, who was lying beaten and bleeding at the side of the road. If they touched him, and he was dead, they would have been unclean, and as a result they would not have been allowed to come into the Temple until they were ritually cleansed. They didn't want that to happen!

A touch could make you unclean!

It's the same for the Brahmin class in India.

So this man, one of the Brahmins, is doing something that is forbidden, that is socially unacceptable, when he feeds and touches and takes care of the poor.

In our scripture passage this morning, we see Jesus also crossing the boundaries of society. He sits by a well in Samaria in the middle of the day, waiting while the disciples go to the next town to buy food. He's resting and undoubtedly wanting a drink of the cool water from the well, but he has no bucket to bring the water up. He can smell the water, feel the coolness of it coming up out of the well, but he can't reach it.

And so he sits, thirsty and hot.

The village women typically come to draw water in the morning and the evening, but not in the middle of the day, not in the noonday sun.

So Jesus waits.

He sees a woman coming with a water jar. Why she is coming at this hour of the day, we are not told. Some people have speculated that she is an outcast among the villagers because she is a "woman of ill-repute" but really we don't know that. Scripture doesn't say it.

Maybe she hadn't been feeling well earlier or maybe she had a sick child she was caring for and that delayed her arrival at the well.

Even the details of her life that Jesus tells us, about being married 5 times and now living with a man who is not her husband is really no proof of her immorality.

Maybe she is a 5-time widow. Maybe living with a man she is not married to is her only means of support, of having a home. We don't know. Women did not have many options in those days and we don't know her side of the story. We don't even know her name.

Regardless of the reason she came to the well alone in the middle of the day, Jesus was not supposed to talk to her. Men didn't talk to women they didn't know, and Jews didn't talk to Samaritans! Jews considered Samaritans to be heretics, unbelievers, blasphemers!

The woman questions his motives and asks about where it is proper to worship, but that is only one piece of the theological differences between Jews and Samaritans.

Today, we also disagree over various points of religion. We allow these disagreements to divide us and anger us. Instead of transforming ourselves into the unified Body of Christ, we allow our differences to transform us into Us and Them.

We forget that we worship one God, that we have one faith and one baptism, and instead we allow relationships to be broken, both between us, and also between us and God.

So Jesus tore down society's boundaries and spoke to an outsider, and a mere woman at that! She didn't come to the well looking for the Messiah, but that is who she found!

Jesus not only tore down society's boundaries, but he totally annihilated the differences between the religions!

The time has already come, he told her, when people will no longer worship on the Samaritans' holy mountain or in the Jews' holy city of Jerusalem, but that people have already begun to worship in spirit and in truth.

It doesn't matter where we worship. What matters is HOW we worship! In spirit and in truth! With all of ourselves and without any pretense or airs or requirements that are put on us by the past!

But I do need to add a word of caution to that.

Because if you are not "in a worshipful mood" or you feel that there is something preventing you from coming to God whole-heartedly,

or if you have doubts or questions or fears or anger, that doesn't mean you should not come to worship!

And the reason I say that is found in our reading this morning, in this experience of the Samaritan woman at the well.

The woman could have waited to draw water until the Jewish man she didn't know had left. She could have avoided a very uncomfortable situation by simply waiting and going to the well later.

If she had known that he knew everything she'd ever done, that he knew all of her secrets and her struggles, she really might have waited!

But she didn't wait. She came to the well, 043(l)2.34138(l)-6.440.3072(a)2.46043

And so, when we are not feeling like worshipping, when we are distracted by the cares and the concerns of our lives, when maybe we have secrets to keep and worries that make us feel that we just want to stay home----that is when we need to come to God the most!

That is when we need to come to the well of worship and drink deeply of that living water! And it will fill us up, reaching into our empty places in ways that we do not expect!

Living water will wash us clean, rinse away the dirt and sin of the past, and make us new again, refreshed again, inside and out, because Jesus knows everything we've ever done and still comes to us, waits for us, offers us grace and forgiveness.

Living water overflowing out of the well and carrying us away in a flood of grace.

When the disciples came back from buying food, they saw Jesus talking to the woman, but no one questioned him or scolded him. They knew he had done something that was socially unacceptable, but then I guess they were used to it. They weren't surprised about it.

But what they were surprised about it is that Jesus didn't want the food they had brought back for him. He said he had food they knew nothing about.

That confused the disciples. Had someone brought him food? He had been hungry and tired when they left. Tired enough that he wanted to sit down and wait for them. Hungry enough that he sent them to get him something to eat. So why didn't he want the food?

He tells his disciples, "My food is to do the will of God who sent me and to finish his work. Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."

What does he mean?

He's not hungry any more because he has just done the will of God and begun to harvest!

At that very moment the woman he met at the well is bringing people from the village to meet him, and scripture tells us that many of them came to believe that he was the Messiah!

Harvested!

And to do that work, to harvest those people, filled Jesus up! He was no longer hungry because he had done the work of God!

By giving the woman living water, he was fed!

Inside of him was a hunger, a yearning, a deep desire to bring more people to know God, to help them to understand what God is really like by showing them who he is!

God knows everything we have ever done, and still God wants patiently for us, wanting a deeper relationship with us, walking with us through the twists and turns of our lives.

In that relationship our thirst for grace and mercy will be quenched. We will worship in spirit and in truth because our relationship with God will be deep and strong, and our hearts will overflow with the love of Christ.

That overflowing love will pour out of us and we will, by words and actions, tell other people that we have met a man who has told us everything we've ever done---the Messiah, the savior, the one who came from God to show us what God is like!

And that will be our food. That will fulfill our deepest longing and need, that we are helping with the harvest.

Because people around us, and we ourselves, are ripe for harvest---- ready to hear that God waits for us by the well of grace and mercy, that God comes to us no matter who we are and what we have done.

Like the woman at the well, we can receive that living water from being in the presence of Christ.

And we, too, can be fed by doing the work of God, helping others grow in their relationships with God, growing in our relationships with God and with each other.

It may not always be socially acceptable to be and live as the people of God. It may be uncomfortable sometimes to admit to God that our lives are not perfect, that we have made mistakes.

The bright light of the sun in the middle of the day may mean that Christ takes us by surprise sometimes.

But we can come to Christ the way we are and receive forgiveness.

And after drinking of the living water, we will never be the same.

Like the poor and the destitute of India, who begin to feel human again after being fed and cared for by the man who is a Brahmin, we will be restored to our own true selves by our relationship with God---

our own true selves who are assured that we are not only fully human, but also the beloved children of the living God.

Come to Christ. He waits for you to give you living water. He invites you to join in the harvest and eat the food of doing God's will. Come, and find everything you need.

Amen.