

3rd Sunday of Lent – (Year A - RCIA) – March 4, 2018

EX 17:3-7; PS 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9; ROM 5:1-2, 5-8; JN 4:5-42

Imagine how differently today's Gospel account would have ended if, instead of *Jesus* speaking to the woman at the well, it would have been one of the handful of **cardinals** and **bishops** in the Church today who insist on teaching things about the permanence of **marriage** that *directly contradict the teachings of Jesus Christ and of his Church*.

Hiding their distorted teaching behind terms like “**accompaniment**”, this very small minority of dissident cardinals and bishops—who are *supposed* to imitate **Jesus the Good Shepherd**—are, in fact, **speaking** and **behaving** more like “**wolves in shepherd's clothing**”...leading many of the faithful *away* from the very same Christ who so **skillfully**, **lovingly** and *truthfully* led the **woman at the well** *away* from **slavery to sin** and toward the **merciful embrace** of God the **Father**.

It's disturbing **enough** how—left to **our own devices**—each one of us is capable of rejecting **God's genuine love** in favor of *counterfeit relationships, lifestyles* and “**loves**” which inevitably leave our **souls dying of thirst**...thirst for the *truth...that sets us free* (cf. Jn 8:32).

Though our own propensity to **stray** from Jesus is, **indeed** troubling, it's **far worse** when we are *led* away from Christ, by **well-intentioned, but misguided spiritual leaders** who—having convinced **themselves** that they are *ministering properly to* the faithful even as they preach a **diluted gospel** that contradicts the **Gospel of Christ**—are, in reality, leading their **flock**—and *themselves*—back into the very **slavery to sin** from which Christ came to set us free.

Just imagine, then, how **differently** the Gospel incident would have unfolded had one of these **beguiled bishops** conversed with the woman at the well.

It might sound something like this:

“Go call your husband and come back.”

The woman answered and said to him, “I do not have a husband.”

The *bishop* answered her, “*You are right in saying, ‘I do not have a husband.’ But the relationship you do have—even though the Church calls it “living in sin”— actually has redeeming qualities which, we might say... sort of cancel out the sin.*

Now, since God’s expectations are very *admirable*—though *highly unattainable* in light of human weakness—you just go *right ahead* and keep living the way you are...and...*while you’re at it...come and receive Holy Communion!*

The *bishop* continues: Because, as wonderful as it would be if everyone lived *faithfully* the teachings of Jesus, you and I both know (*wink, wink*) that they’re *completely unrealistic* for the *average* person, especially in *today’s* world, and we need the grace of Jesus in the Eucharist to *help* us...even if some *unsympathetic* leaders in the Church claim that what we’re asking Jesus to *help* us with, is, in fact, *offensive* to him.

I mean, Jesus said to “*pluck out your eye if it causes you to sin*” (cf. Mt 18:19) but he didn’t mean that *literally!* And if he *didn’t* really mean *that*, then he didn’t *really* mean that marriage is *forever*. These are just *ideals*, right? You’re ok. I’m ok. We’re all ok! So just come back to the “table” and receive the Eucharist as long as your *conscience* tells you it’s ok.”

Quite obviously, our **Gospel** today would have had a **very different** outcome had the dialogue gone in **that** direction!

For one thing, it would have been a lot **shorter** than today’s Gospel, because the conversation would have ended **at the well**...even though it would not have **ended well** either for the **woman** or for the **impostor** pretending to be a **good shepherd**.

After all, the woman would have had **no motivation** to **repent**—to **turn away from sin**. And if there were no reason to **change**—because she had been told, **by someone she trusted**, that her sin was “**Ok, in your case**”—then neither would there have been **any motivation** for her to **go and tell others**—that is, to **evangelize**—about an **extraordinary encounter** with the **Living God** who **set her free** from the **confusion** and **emptiness** that constituted her daily existence.

Rather, **confirmed in her scandalous sin** by a **cowardly cleric**, she could return to her community, **perhaps self-satisfied** and **affirmed** at a **superficial level**, but still

starving in the depths of her soul because she would continue to live beneath her **dignity** as a woman...created in the **image and likeness of God**.

When **Jesus** called himself the **Good Shepherd**, he contrasted *his love* with the **false concern of fake shepherds** who **pretend** to care for the sheep, but who **flee** at the first sign that *they* might be called to sacrifice. Jesus said:

He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep.
(Jn 10:12-13)

As secular “wolves” seek to *devour* marriage *as God has given marriage to humanity*—those **within** the Church who **stand aside as the wolves attack** are anything **but** good shepherds, no matter what **sweet sounding words** they use to abdicate their spiritual fatherhood. They **oppose** Christ...and *expose* their flock to danger...because they **refuse the difficult cross** of speaking the **truth**...with genuine **love**.

Without being challenged by a **shepherd** who was **genuinely concerned** with his **spiritual daughter’s** soul to “*be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect*” (cf. Mt 5:48), the woman at the well would have been **deprived of the peace** that comes from **living in the Truth** because she would have been **guided**—or rather, **mis-guided**—by an ordained minister who lacked both a **man’s backbone**...and a **father’s heart**.

But thanks be to God it *wasn’t* a **gutless shepherd** who conversed with the woman. It was the **Good Shepherd**—*Jesus Christ* himself.

A **shameful shepherd** who deprives his spiritual sons and daughter of the **truth**, is depriving them of **Jesus** because Jesus is “*the truth*” (cf. Jn 14:6). And since, as Jesus said, “*No one comes to the Father except through me*” (cf. Jn 14:6) to deprive a soul of **Jesus** is, ultimately, to deprive a beloved son or daughter of their **father**—*God the Father*.

Jesus told the woman, “*...the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him.*” (Jn 4:23-24)

God the **Father** seeks out sinners, through his **Son**—the *Good Shepherd*—to bring them back home safely. The *wolves in shepherd's clothing*—who deliberately deprive their spiritual sons and daughters of the **Truth**—prevent their flock from coming to the **Father**...and simultaneously place *their own souls* in grave peril.

Because, as **Jesus** said, in the **Gospel of Luke**:

Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin... (Lk 17:1-2)

So, we can see the dangers posed by **wolves in shepherd's clothing**. But our Gospel today shows the *chain reaction of grace* that is **unleashed** when a sinner is **touched by the Truth**—*Jesus Christ himself*—and when the **mercy** and **love** that now flood the sinners heart cannot be **contained**...but must be *shared*.

The **Gospel** tells us:

The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Messiah?" (Jn 4:28-29)

And how did the townspeople respond?

Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me everything I have done." When the Samaritans came to him, they invited him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. Many more began to believe in him because of his word, and they said to the woman, "We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world." (Jn 4:39-42)

This last statement was **not** a **slam** on the *woman*—as if **she** no longer **mattered**. Rather, it was an **affirmation** that she had **accomplished her mission** to **bring others** to **encounter** the *saving, restorative love of Jesus*, and **then** to let *Jesus* do **his work** on each of **their hearts**.

This woman embodied what **St. Paul** wrote to the **Corinthians**:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Cor 3:6-7)

Jesus wants to free **you** and **me** from our sins.

But he doesn't want it to stop **there!**

He wants the love and mercy which he pours into *our* hearts to so **overwhelm** us that we “*cannot [help] but speak [to others] of what we have seen and heard.*” (cf. Acts 4:20). Jesus wants us to respond just like the woman at the well, who was transformed from **uninspired sinner** to **powerful proclaimer** of the **saving Gospel of Christ**, by her willingness to *look at her own life* in the **light of truth** that Jesus **shined** into her *heart*. It was because of **Jesus' genuine love for the woman** that he spoke the truth to her.

And the truth set her free!

Sometimes we Catholics want to run and hide when we are told that *all Christians have a duty to evangelize*. That's because we probably have a **confused concept of evangelization**.

Evangelization does not require a **degree in theology** or an **arsenal of memorized Scripture passages** in order to be effective. The woman at the well did not instantly become a **theologian** or a **Scripture Scholar** because of **one conversation** with Jesus. But she **did** become an effective evangelizer precisely because of *her willingness to testify about the effect that Jesus had on her soul*.

Evangelization begins by sharing the story of our personal encounter with Jesus!

If we have not **had** such an encounter, then all we need do is **give Jesus permission—right now—to come to us...to quench our spiritual thirst...and to touch and heal our hardened, wounded hearts**.

And if we allow him that much...he knows...he most **certainly** knows...what to do from there!