An American businessman on vacation was standing at the pier of a quaint coastal Mexican village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the small boat were several large yellow fin tuna. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish.

"How long did it take you to catch them?" the American asked.

"Only a little while." The Mexican replied.

"Why don't you stay out longer and catch more fish?" The American then asked.

"With this I have more than enough to support my family's needs," the Mexican said.

"But," The American then asked, "What do you do with the rest of your time?"

The Mexican fisherman said, "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a siesta with my wife, Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, senor."

The American scoffed, "Look, I'm a Harvard MBA and I could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds you buy a bigger boat, and with the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats."

"Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the consumers, eventually opening your own canning factory. You would control the product, processing and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then LA or maybe NYC where you would run your expanding enterprise."

The Mexican fisherman asked,

"But senor, how long will this all take?"

To which the American replied,

"15-20 years."

"But what then, senor?"

The American laughed and said, "That's the best part. When the time is right you would announce an IPO (Initial Public Offering) and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich; you'd make millions."

"Millions, senor? Then what?"

The American said slowly, "Then you would retire. Move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your grandkids, take a siesta with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos..."

If I asked anyone here: What do you really want out of life? most of us would respond by saying we hope for good health for ourselves and those we love, success in our personal endeavors, harmony within our families. In our better moments, we would expand our personal concerns and say that we long for world peace and an end to war and violence, a solution to the world hunger crisis and wide-spread poverty; the preservation of our world’s resources and an end to discrimination and hatred. These are deep longings of the human heart. One of the reasons we come to church is to share those desires and
move from the sphere of our personal lives into something bigger than ourselves – into the rich and ancient tradition of the Church. Here we hear the scriptures proclaimed, the very Word of God. Here we find a community of faithful believers with whom we share those grand visions. Here we discover something that is bigger than each of us, someone who is greater than all of us... and we commit ourselves to what we discover.

These yearnings of the human heart don’t arise easily, and working to fulfill them is an even greater challenge. There are so many distractions -- things which block our minds from the important stuff of life. More often than not we’re like the grumbling and complaining people of Israel -- stranded in the desert, with nothing to satisfy them -- feeling abandoned by God. Even the geographic names in our Old Testament today reveal the struggles of the human family. ‘Horeb’ means dry and desolate; ‘Massah’ means place of testing; ‘Meribah’ means dissatisfaction. Lent, this time of testing, this dry desert place, offers us a chance for an annual spiritual check-up, a chance to have a re-alignment of our souls.

The woman at the well is a great model for us this Lent and any time because she’s got a fight on her hands, like we often do: a fight with Jesus, this stranger who invades her space and captures her heart. In their seven-fold exchange a verbal fencing match ensues. Each combatant, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, thrusts, lunges and retreats; and at each turn she finds herself defeated. She comes to the well to draw water; Jesus promises “living water.” She tries to distract the conversation by speaking of traditions that bind. Jesus breaks tradition and unleashes for her the power of God. The woman tries to hide her past; Jesus reveals her past so she can be free of it and move into the future. The woman argues about proper place of worship; Jesus wants her to find God everywhere. The woman quenches her thirst in frustrated anticipation, coming to the well over and over. Jesus offers to fulfill her hopes right here, right now and forever.

It’s easy to want to “give up” and settle for water from the well, instead of the waters of life that Jesus offers. Lent is a contest, a fight within our souls. As Jesus contended with Satan in the wilderness, the contest depicted in the painting in the vestibule, there is a war waged within each of us. The poet Rainier Marie Rilke describes it well:

*What we choose to fight is so tiny! What fights with us is so great.*

*If only we would let ourselves be dominated as things do by some immense storm, we would become strong too, and not need names.*

*When we win it’s with small things and the triumph itself makes us small.*

*What is extraordinary and eternal does not want to be bent by us... This is how one grows:* by being defeated, decisively, by constantly greater beings.

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Like us, the woman of Samaria picks tiny fights and concerns herself with trivial pursuits; but Jesus invites her and us into a bigger drama, a greater vision. And she grows - from fascination with Jesus, to calling him a prophet, to recognizing him as the Messiah and Savior. Most importantly, she becomes an apostle by telling others about Jesus and bringing them to him.

The rapid movement of faith in this woman’s life happens in one gospel scene. For us, coming to the depth of faith is a process, a life-long process. It doesn’t happen in one conversation with Jesus. It only happens through prayer, over a lifetime.

As people of faith, let’s not pick tiny fights; let our struggles be over the important things of life... things that will make a difference in our homes and in our communities, in our parish and in our world. Let’s pick a fight where the stakes are high and the challenge is great and the victory is not ours, but God’s.

There was a knock on the door one morning and the unsuspecting resident opened it to find a young man standing there who said: "Hello sir, I’m a Jehovah’s Witness." The man said: "Come in and sit down." He offered him coffee and asked: "What do you want to talk about?" The young man said, “Beats the heck out of me; I’ve never gotten this far before.” In today’s gospel, the woman at the well should have followed the instructions parents usually give to their children: ‘Never talk to a stranger.’ Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman opens for her a door she never expected to enter. Unlike the young man knocking at the door who didn’t know where to begin, Jesus knew precisely where his starting point was.

Use these Lenten days to recognize once again what you are really yearning for, what you really want in life, what you’re dying for, as the ancient Israelites were dying for water in the wilderness. And take whatever opportunity you can to open the door for Jesus and believe the Good News, that, in Christ, the fullness of life has been handed to us as a pure gift. In our encounter with Jesus, in his Word and in the Eucharist, our love is deeper and our hearts have grown larger. Come to experience again for yourself, not just on the word of others, the peace and joy that faith in Jesus Christ can bring.

*Father John Kasper, OSFS*