

15 March 2020

Third Sunday of Lent

John 4:5-42

[First, regarding the coronavirus in our world, you probably heard that Bishop Callahan has relaxed the rule to attend mass every Sunday, urging physically vulnerable and those who are sick to stay away from Sunday mass. We gathered this Sunday, but will of course follow any future restrictions, so we might be in the very strange situation of having no public celebrations of mass on Sunday. If you do not attend, please make every effort to sustain your relationship with the Church and Jesus by praying the mass. Daily mass with the pope is available via a quick search on YouTube “Daily mass with Pope Francis” or through the Vatican Radio website. The readings for every day of the week are available by clicking the date on the calendar displayed on the cover page of the Bishop’s Conference web page, usccb.org. In addition, I found the article “Faith the Time of Coronavirus” a very good read. It advises us to Resist Panic, Do Not Demonize or Scapegoat anyone or any group, Care for the Sick, Pray, and Trust that God is with You. While many events are canceled, Love is not canceled! If you’d like to read the entire article, you can online, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/13/faith-time-coronavirus>.]

One of the things you notice when in the Holy Land is that some houses/buildings have white or black tanks on them, maybe 100 gallon cylinders that hold water. While Israelis have a reliable supply of running water, Palestinians rely on these tanks for times when their water supply is cut off. The city of Nablus, in the West Bank, the city of the historical Shechem, the location of Jacob’s Well where Jesus meets the Samaritan Woman, is a Palestinian city, and so the tradition of thirst continues to this day. We need water. Without it, we would all grumble like the people Moses was trying to lead through the wilderness. We would be willing to work day after day to get more water from the well like the woman Jesus met. To have all you can drink without fear, something we take for granted in our part of the world, is a great prize beyond imagination for so many throughout history and even today in Nablus and many parts of the world.

Jesus plays on this notion of thirst; he knows that we know about thirst on a physical level. He offers “Living Water,” which she at first interprets on a physical level—yes, give it to me so I won’t have to keep coming back to the well day after day! But he is trying to awaken her to a spiritual thirst that he can satisfy with his gift of Living Water, which is nothing other than himself.

I became aware of my spiritual thirst at an early age, though I couldn’t name it as such at the time. I remember having what I would now call a yearning. Back then, I was only about 6 or 7 years old, I thought it was physical hunger or a craving. I’d try orange juice...nope, or cinnamon toast...nope. I tried lots of things and none of them satisfied my craving. A few months after these first yearnings, I went to Johnny Neppel’s birthday party and his mom had a tray of these orange hard marshmallow “circus peanuts.” I took a bite of one and by the time it hit the back of my throat I thought, “This is it! This is what I’ve been hungry for all my life!” I really thought I had solved the riddle of my craving. So, I ate a whole bunch and got sick and realized that wasn’t it after all. With the benefit of many additional years of living, I realized that **this craving was or is a God-given yearning for love. And while it can never be quenched once and for all, each time I’m able to give or receive the purest kind of love, I know that yearning is in touch with that for which it is longing. That’s why a tear often comes to our eyes with we witness, receive, or give this kind of love.**

The woman at the well has a name in the Greek Orthodox tradition: Photini, or “Enlightened One.” She is enlightened because she recognized the one who “told me everything I ever did!” as the one who offered her that for which she most yearned in her life. Call it Living Water, Bread of Life...it is Love.

Scripture scholars commonly point out that the detail of Photini showing up to get water at noon indicates that she is socially an outsider. All the other women would go to the well for the day’s water early in the morning before it got too hot. One commentator suggested that she is actually a victim of abuse, used up and discarded by five former husbands. Despised, gossiped about, lonely. The commentator quipped that when she told her neighbors, “He told me everything I’ve ever done,” they would have retorted, “Sister, everyone knows everything you’ve ever done!”

Gossiped about, an outsider, lonely, Photini meets Jesus. Jesus shows his knowledge of her, but without judgment. He is compassionate, caring, crossing a social barrier with purity of heart to offer her Living Water. He uncovers her wound and gazes upon it with compassion, and so her wound is transfigured into joy.

There are many **traditions about what happened to Photini** after that, but all agree she was a great missionary bringing others to faith in Jesus and that she was a martyr. She converted much of the household of Emperor Nero to Christianity. Nero was a persecutor of Christians and so tried to kill her, but she survived attempts to burn her, and to poison her...the strength of the living water. **By great irony, accounts of her death usually include that she died by being thrown deep into a dry well. But it was a sweet death, for although she died from lack of physical water, the Living Water continued as a spring welling up to eternal life.**