

In many cities throughout the world, there are so-called “no-go zones”, where law enforcement personnel, out of legitimate concern for their safety, are reluctant to enter. While serving a Schenectady parish in the early nineties, I was informed by police officers that one neighborhood, in particular, was especially dangerous, Hamilton Hill, and that they all needed to take pre-cautionary measures in advance of a visit or a call. More recently, while serving the Catholic community of Sacred Heart Church, I have learned that there are unsafe sections in the city of Troy, that greatly concern the police, who fear for the security of those citizens who live in those drug and gang infested neighborhoods.

In the days of Jesus, the Samaritan city of Sychar, was a “no-go zone” for Jews. Jews and Samaritans held each other in contempt. Between them there was bad blood, which often over-flowed into acts of violence. Jews avoided using Samaritan cups because they could become ritually unclean and hence unfit for worship. Some of the rabbis considered all Samaritan women as unclean. Therefore, to come into physical contact with a known heretic and pagan was a serious matter. Consider the words of the Samaritan woman: “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan for a drink?” (Jn.4:9) How could a Jew ask a Samaritan for a favor?

There were two normal routes for going from Judea to Galilee. The shorter one went through the city of Galilee; the other, which followed the Jordan, was longer. Jesus showed no fear in choosing the Samaritan route, perhaps not because it was shorter, and, undoubtedly, busier, but also to have a chance to preach to the Samaritans.

Jesus and the Samaritan woman encountered one another at about noon, the middle of the day when the heat was most intense and oppressive. In all likelihood, they were hot, dusty and thirsty. Clearly, for the Samaritan it was a critical and defining moment in her troubled life. Some of you may recall the distinguished American actor, Gary Cooper, in his role as Marshal Frank Kane in the award winning film, “High Noon”. Hoping to retire, he is dissuaded from doing so once he learns that a local outlaw, Frank Miller, has been set free, and is seeking revenge on him who earlier had turned him in. When the time comes for Miller and his fellow hoodlums to face off with the Marshal, he must face them alone at high noon. It would prove to be the most decisive moment of his life and his crowning achievement of his life as a lawman.

Jesus’ words, “Give me a drink”(Jn.4:7) reminds us of his cry from the cross, “I thirst”(Jn. 19:28). Jesus begs! To quote St. Augustine: “But the one who was asking for a drink of water was thirsting for her faith”. In the account give to us by the Evangelist, it was clearly “high noon” for the Samaritan woman, a critical moment in her life. The woman has been “thirsty” for a long time. She has tried unsuccessfully to quench her thirst through the many relationships she has formed along the way.

Jesus promises her “living water” (Jn.4:10). What do these words mean?

First, His teaching. Two of the expressions used by Jesus “the gift of God” and “living water” were used to describe the torah, the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament;

Second, Living water symbolizes the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that gives life. As Christians we speak of the Spirit as the Lord and giver of life; and

Third, it is the grace that sanctifies and confers eternal life. It is the divine life as it is given by God to us in the soul.

Jesus has an effective way of drawing a in a bad way into the conversation. He is not harsh; nor is he judgmental. He simply wants to bring a lost soul into his orbit. And he showed great courage in entering a ‘no-go zone” and exposing himself to grave danger.

If today many suffer from an unquenchable thirst, it is because they have failed to turn to Christ. The Samaritan woman experiences the presence of God in the man she meets at the well, and she has to immediately share him with the “thirsting” people of her own town.

The salvation of souls is the Church’s primary mission. The “Good News” is for all, and even including all those who live in “no-go zones” today. Even in those dangerous places, Christ needs to be heard! We are called to follow Christ into those hellish places, and witness to the teachings revealed by him who is, “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn. 14:6).