

LENT SUNDAY III "A"

MARCH 14/15, 2020

The "Iowa 80" truck stop near the Scott County town of Walcott bills itself as the world's largest truck stop. It has been said that when traveling the highways and by-ways of America, stop where all the trucks are parked. So it was for near eastern watering holes. In an arid landscape they were a place where one could quench one's thirst after being parched by the desert. Jesus stops at the truck stop of his day dismissing his disciples to go into the nearby town and purchase provisions for them on their journey. Jacob's well, going back to the time of the patriarch, was one of the most popular of such places in Samaria. It was hard to beat, for both its water and its nostalgia. By custom, the women of the town would have come out early in the day to draw the day's supply of water for their homes, exchange pleasantries, and bits of news. Anyone stopping at noon would obviously be a traveler as is Jesus, for a refreshing drink and then moving on. John tells us that as he sits resting from his journey at the well, Jesus is met by a woman of the town who has come to draw her daily quota of water. It is obvious that this woman is an outcaste since she comes when usually no one else is around. Modern scripture commentators note that her unusual marriage situation, which Jesus alludes to in his dialog with her, is likely not due to a promiscuous lifestyle. Rather she was a widow who had remarried several times and in each marriage was to be found barren and thus, according to Mosaic law, divorced by her then husband and now left to fetch water on her own because none of the women of the town wanted her bad luck to rub off on them. She is an outcaste—ethnically (Samaritans because of intermarriage with Gentiles were not considered "pure" Jews and were shunned culturally and religiously), sexually (she was a woman in a patriarchal society having no rights of her own), a widow (there being no social net to support her). Here we see Jesus, the Good Shepherd, going to the margins to "seek out and save the lost" to save someone who has experienced social, religious, ostracization and perhaps even convinced herself that she is consigned to a life of aloneness and non-love with his message of "I will love you" because "God loves you."

The bond that brings Jesus and the woman together is their mutual thirst. Both ostensibly experience physical thirst, but a deeper level both are thirsting for something greater—the

woman for recognition, value, dignity, worth; Jesus—for relationship, faith. There were barriers between the woman and Jesus. They were strangers to each other and the fear that a stranger creates has always been true. We have all been taught from childhood about “Stranger danger”.

Despite all of this, Jesus and the woman show courage and enter into a dialog of encounter. Encounters by chance or design have the power to change and help us grow. They are sometimes challenging. When another person makes a request that is uncomfortable, it forces us to make decisions we might prefer to avoid. So it is here. Jesus offers the woman “life giving water”, the water of faith and relationship with him that unlike the stale waters she has been imbibing in her quest for acceptance, meaning and purpose in life have only left her thirsting again and again. Her desire leads her to risk professing the truth of Jesus’ identity as the promised Messiah, relinquishing her previous religious understandings and practice. It also entails her being commissioned to go as a disciple and tell others about Jesus with the risk of rejection. Yes, encounters can challenge and change us.

When a refugee or immigrant asks for protection, shall we offer the cup of compassion even when such help challenges the barriers of our assumptions, politics and culture?

When we hear anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, or white racist supremacy speech are we willing to confront prejudice and speak offering the cup of the dignity of every human being?

When a lonely person asks us to join them for lunch or coffee, are we willing to set aside time regardless of our busy schedule and share the cup of companionship with them?

When life requires unusual action, are we willing to break down the boundaries of our own comfort zone to do the right thing?

There is much at stake when we request, or hand over, that metaphorical cup of water. This giving and receiving are more than a thirst-quenching cup of water; they are our fountain of life, our store of living water.

*15 March 2020
Father Jim Secora*