

3rd Sunday in Lent A 12 March 2023
John 4:5-42
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Samaritan woman said to [Jesus], 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'

Shane Claibourne is a devoted, gifted, and tenacious street preacher, evangelist, author, and activist who wears his heart on his sleeve and doesn't mind upsetting important people. I heard him once, speaking to a Lutheran Youth rally in America and one thing he said has stuck with me ever since. His lament is that Christians are better known for what they're against than what they're for. Too often, this is true. It's so easy to fixate on our differences – who's right and who's wrong. We tend to highlight the illnesses in society rather than focusing on the power of love and light to overcome the darkness.

We even do it among ourselves. It's inevitable that when studying the Bible together, issues will arise that participants will have different opinions on, and in an attempt to "resolve the issue" tensions will rise because everyone wants to know the "right answer." And as thornier theological topics are debated, like, single predestination or double predestination, free will or bound will, transubstantiation or consubstantiation, sprinkling or full submersion, discussions can become unproductive and worse, overheated.

While the Luther-Calvin arguments or the Calvin-Wesley arguments, even those of St. Augustine-Pelagius are fun for theologians to quibble over, it's more important to serve the needs of people by helping them to build relationships with Jesus and his Gospel. Many people just want to have a simple Bible study where they get to know and learn to listen to God through Holy Scripture. And surely, our first consideration must be for those who aren't sure whether or not they believe in God at all, or wonder whether Christ is really their Saviour.

Sometimes we get so caught up in what divides us, we forget about the unity we have in Jesus. We're one in Christ. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28,29). Jesus loves Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals – even Lutherans. Indeed, God so loved the world, that he gave us Jesus so that everyone who believes in him has eternal life. God doesn't condemn the world but wants the world to be saved (John 3:16,17).

However, friends, we're also one in our sin. No one is righteous, not even one (Romans 3[:10]) and all have sinned and fall short of God's glory [:23]. We're all one in sin. We can't condemn others because, like the crowd about to stone the woman caught in adultery (John 8[:4,5]), none of us are without sin and can cast the first stone [:7].

To know ourselves means to understand that we can do nothing but sin and evil. To know God is to believe that his grace is mightier than any creature's sin. Hereby, we learn both to despise our sinful nature and to magnify and praise God's grace. The very first step in understanding God, in understanding Christ, is to understand and confess that we're sinners. Christ comes to show us what we really are—sinful people who need God's grace and forgiveness; we need Jesus the Redeemer.

Today's Gospel is the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. The encounter is striking because men simply don't casually engage in conversation with women; much less a Jew talk to a Samaritan. Jesus even asks her for a drink, prompting John to point out that, "(Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans)" [:9]. But Jesus, who's never met the Samaritan woman before, talks to her and reveals things about her life that no other person would ordinarily know. We can only imagine her surprise.

Like the Samaritan woman, we all have our histories. Some, too embarrassing; some, too painful to divulge. I'm certainly glad that no one's taped some of my private conversations or carry-on. We all prefer to keep our uglier moments to ourselves. Still, while we may try to bury some things or hide them from ourselves and others, our conscience will always remind us how far short we fall of God's intention for us. The Samaritan woman believed she had all the water she needed from Jacob's well, but during her encounter with Jesus, she learned that she lacked and needed him, the living water, the water gushing up to eternal life.

Thankfully, God doesn't leave us stranded in our sin but gives us Jesus. We too are offered the living water that will quench our thirst—faith that will still our longing and restless hearts. When we believe in Jesus, our sins are forgiven and we have life and salvation. We have one Lord, one faith, one baptism. It's true that we are one with each other in our sin, but thanks be to God, we're also one in our forgiveness through Christ.

In the first century after Christ, St Clement of Rome (AD 35-99) wrote: "We also, who have been called in Christ Jesus through his will are not justified through ourselves or through our own holiness of heart, but through faith. It is through faith that Almighty God has justified all humanity that has been from the beginning of time."

We are one in faith. I may disagree with the Calvinists on whether Jesus died only for some, the elect, or whether he died for all people. I may disagree with Baptists on the amount of water in baptism and with Roman Catholics on the power and primacy of the pope. However, what's most important is not what divides us, for example - the different forms of liturgy, different styles of music, church organisation, even dare I say it, splitting hairs over the fine points of doctrine. What's most important and gives us a more powerful and authentic testimony as witnesses, is what unifies us as Christians. We are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' time, Jews and Samaritans were suspicious of each other. The region of Samaria had been settled by non-Jews, who over the years, accepted some parts of the Jewish religion but not others. They accepted the books of Moses but not the prophets. They sacrificed to God on Mount Gerizim which towers over Sychar where Jesus met the woman at the well, rather than sacrificing at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Samaritans believed that a Messiah would come but not from the line of King David. The Jews despised the Samaritans. They really believed that Samaritans were idol worshippers in disguise. The Jews treated all Samaritans like lepers and avoided them at all cost.

It was good news for the Samaritan woman that the day was dawning when these differences wouldn't be so important. True worship wouldn't take place either on Mt. Gerizim or in the Temple; rather, in spirit and in truth. The object of true worship is Jesus Christ; not our rituals or traditions or their lack. Whether we worship in a solemn high mass in a European cathedral or sway with 15000 Africans in an open paddock; formally or informally, long or short, contemporary or traditional—these are human preferences; neither commanded nor forbidden by God. We're free to kneel for communion or stand up. We're free to sprinkle our babies with water or dunk them in the ocean. We may choose to sing a cappella, be accompanied by a pipe organ, piano, band or even a kazoo—these things are peripheral to the main event. The main event, the crucial relationship, is Jesus, his kingdom, and our salvation.

John's Gospel for today tells us what ultimately matters. The Samaritan woman said to Jesus, "'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you'" (John 4:25,26). Jesus, God's Word, is living water; Jesus is the water of life. Those who drink have everlasting life. His promise to sinful human beings; all human beings, is that in him their sins are forgiven. In Jesus, we have life and salvation. We are one in our salvation through Christ. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.