

REFLECTIONS ON A WONDERFUL GOSPEL

Reflection for the Third Sunday of Lent, Cycle A

We only hear today's gospel (John 4:1-34) once every three years. It is the wonderful account of a meeting between a woman with a series of failed relationships and a man with a compassionate heart.

She Lets Jesus In

Reflecting on today's gospel Patricia Sanchez writes:

She, for her part, is remembered by the church as one who allowed her own life and all her dark secrets and shameful acts to be the venue through which Jesus would teach of the necessity of repentance. Where others might have turned away and shunned Jesus' probing questions and challenges, the woman let him in. With Jesus, she looked at her life and she allowed him to point out those places in her heart that needed to be filled with God's gift of living water. Thirsty for the gifts he offered, she welcomed him into her life. Then, with the grateful elatedness that comes to those who know themselves to be fully forgiven, she ran to tell others of her experience. In this, she rules as our teacher and Lenten guide. She welcomed Jesus not only into the tidy anteroom or parlor of her life, where formal visitors are received and carefully but superficially entertained before being sent on their way. On the contrary, she allowed Jesus access to that deepest part of herself, that place where most of us allow no one, and where, if truth be told, we'd rather not even go ourselves.

For her daring, for her humility, for her willingness to be exposed to the truth, the woman was graced with the desire for and the resolve to repent. Her experience is set before us once again so that from her and with her, we too might welcome Jesus into those seamy places in our lives where he alone can make a difference. With her, we are called to repent of our sins and selfishness so as to be thirsty for the gifts of God that come to us in Jesus. With her, we are to allow those gifts to change us from within so as to be more authentic witnesses to the presence of God in our lives, in our world.

This week, the teacher sent to us by Jesus is a woman with a questionable past; next week, a blind man will enlighten us; and the week after next, a man resuscitated from the dead will lead us to the truth. We, for our part, are to remain open to God's surprises and docile to the teachers God sends to us, not only through the pages of scripture but also through the various people, places and the happenstances that constitutes our lives.

'I and Thou'

Jay Cormier offers the following two reflections on today's gospel.

In 1923, the Jewish theologian Martin Buber wrote an immensely influential little book entitled I and Thou. Buber's main point is that there are two ways of relating to other people in our lives: We can see them as objects to be used—what Buber calls an "I-it" relationship or we can see others as having feelings, dreams and needs as real and as important as our own that can be the basis for dialogue and relationship—an "I-Thou" relationship.

In his memoirs, Buber tells the story of how he came to his theory of I-Thou and I-It. When he was a professor of philosophy at a university in Germany, a young student came to see him. The student had received his draft notice to serve in the German army in World War I. He was a pacifist by nature and afraid of being killed in battle, but, at the same time, he was a loyal and fiercely patriotic German.

He asked Buber what he should do: serve his country and risk being killed or claim conscientious objector status and perhaps leave another young man to be killed in his place.

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Buber was in the midst of a difficult theological-philosophical treatise and was annoyed at the young man's claim on his time and attention. The professor said something along the lines of that's a serious dilemma; do what you think is right.

The young man, in despair for lack of guidance, committed suicide, and Buber, for the rest of his life, felt a measure of guilt for not being more present to that young man, for seeing him only as an interruption and not as a human soul in torment. Buber felt he had sinned against the image of God in that young student by treating him as an object without needs and feelings.

[From *The Lord in My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-third Psalm* by Harold S. Kushner.]

It is so easy to treat others as objects, to measure their worth by what they are able to do for us. We carelessly dismiss as unimportant if not undesirable those who distract us from our own agendas, who demand too much from us, who make us uncomfortable, who fail to live up to our expectations. We expect a great deal from one another—sometimes too much—and it seems there is no end to our disappointment in our spouses, our children (our parents!), our coworkers, our neighbors. Our standards of what is right and proper often drive some people to the edges of society, far away from us. The Samaritan woman is one such victim. Her religious background and her nationality make her a nonperson in the eyes of Judaism; her lifestyle makes her a pariah among her own. But rather than reject her, Jesus calls forth from her a sense of faith and joy that enables her to confront her life, and in telling others of her encounter with Jesus, she becomes a source of faith and joy for others. May we be able to do the same: to move beyond the failings of others and our disappointment in them in order to call forth the good they possess and make it possible for them to use those gifts for the good of all.

Christ at 50th Street

Sometimes the gospel is played out in surprising ways and in unexpected places. From *The New York Times*:

As theatergoers and commuters boarded the subway car at 50th Street, they saw a 40-ish woman, fighting back tears, standing silently in the middle of the car. She was holding a sign, colorful and legible but not always understandable, written mostly in English, with some Spanish. It explained that she was destitute and asked for help or money.

Most ignored her— except for a young, bespectacled man in a red parka who was reading a book in Spanish. As the woman passed, he called her over and, after some difficulty maneuvering her backpack, she sat down next to him. He put his arm around her and started speaking to her in Spanish.

They prayed together briefly, and then he arranged his parka around her shoulders and continued talking to her. As he spoke, she ceased being a panhandler—a “nonperson” - and became a person, and a very needy one.

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A man who witnessed the scene with his wife remembers: “When we left the car on 14th Street, they were still conversing. We had entered the subway mildly depressed [having spent an afternoon at a terrible play]. We left exhilarated, the afternoon redeemed: how often does one see a genuine saint in action?”

[From “Metropolitan Diary” *The New York Times*, Dec. 29, 2003]

On that subway train, Christ was as alive and present as he is in today's Gospel. The young man in the

red parka possesses the Spirit of God that sees beyond labels and rumors and appearances and lifts the poor woman up to dignity and hope—just as Jesus does for the Samaritan woman. All of us who have encountered Jesus are called to be reconcilers, not judges; we are called to lift people up, not drive them to their knees. To be disciples of Jesus is to reach out and bring forth from one another the good each one of us possesses as a son and daughter of God. In so many ordinary ways we can help one another realize new life and hope in Christ if we are willing to tear down the walls that divide us, to reach over the distances between us, to build bridges over chasms of mistrust and prejudice.

Documentary on the Power of Forgiveness

Recently I viewed the above documentary on Forgiveness which I now wish to share with all who are interested. On the back cover of the DVD it states:

“At a time when we see so much evil, we are called upon to have the moral grandeur and spiritual audacity to believe in good, to proclaim it, to stand in conviction, to take the people who truly do evil and, yes, hold them accountable. But to nevertheless stand for the possibility to human redemption that turns even the hardest hearts.”-

Marianne Williamson, author of *Healing the Soul of America*

To forgive someone can be simple. But this simple act can have powerful consequences—and may lead to a personal and spiritual transformation.

Over the last 20 years the study of forgiveness has come into its own. Researchers are examining the psychological and physical effects of forgiveness on individuals and within relationship under an amazingly wide variety of conditions, ranging from petty insults to sexual assault. Clinicians now help guide people to forgive transgressions and get on with their lives.

*From Northern Ireland to Ground Zero to the Amish countryside, featuring Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh, best selling authors Thomas Moore and Marianne Williamson, the Reverend James Forbes and others, **The Power of Forgiveness** explores this important work, and reveals how forgiveness can transform your life.*

“Forgiveness allows us to actually let go of the pain in the memory, and if we let go of the pain in the memory, we can have the memory, but it doesn’t control us. When the memory controls us, we are then puppets of the past.”

Alexandra Asseily, founder of the Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut