

A priest and a rabbi are discussing the pros and cons of their various religions, and inevitably the discussion turns to repentance. The rabbi explains Yom Kippur, the solemn Day of Atonement, a day of fasting and penitence, while the priest tells him all about Lent, and its 40 days of self-denial and absolution from sins.

After the discussion ends, the rabbi goes home to tell his wife about the conversation, and they discuss the merits of Lent versus Yom Kippur. She throws her head back -- and laughs. The rabbi says, "What's so funny?" Her response: "40 days of Lent -- one day of Yom Kippur....so, even when it comes to sin, Gentiles pay retail!"

This gospel is the first of three from John's gospel that are always used for the celebration of the Scrutinies for the Elect -- those who are to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. The Rite of Christian Initiation says this: "The scrutinies, which are solemnly celebrated on Sundays and are reinforced by an exorcism, are rites for self-searching and repentance and have above all a spiritual purpose. The scrutinies are meant to uncover, then heal -- all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen --all that is upright, strong, and good." (RCIA #141) And of course, we pray in solidarity with our 3 Elect because we are all in the same need.

In the Gospel of the Samaritan woman, there are 2 different strains of interpretation -- one that says this story of this unnamed woman is about the worship of 5 false gods (the word for husband and god is BAAL), and the other a more human interpretation about a woman who was living a scandalous life. I'm going with this latter one today -- because I did the other one 2 years ago. The scandalous interpretation is more prevalent in the tradition -- AND it's just plain, well, more interesting! We could entitle the sermon "Jesus at high noon with the shady lady." Now Sychar was ancient Shechem, associated with Jacob and the well where he met his wife Rebekah. The woman, as some suggest, may have brought her water jar at noon, because she was shunned by the other women who typically would come early in the morning or in the cool of the evening. Jesus shockingly broke social conventions by engaging with the woman at the well, something noted by both the woman (v. 9) and by Jesus' disciples (v. 27). Unrelated respectable men and women did not interact alone together in that culture and even today in much of the Middle East. And Samaritans and Jews hated each other, and had little to do with one another. The animosity went back to 723 B.C. when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, whose capital was Samaria. The Assyrians took away many of the surviving Israelites, and in their place imported pagan peoples. (See 2 Kings 17; 18:9-12) Many years later, when the Jews returned to Judah from exile in Babylon in the years following 538 B.C., people from the area of Samaria interacted negatively with them. Samaritans built a rival temple on Mt Gerizim -- just south of Sychar -- which the Jews later destroyed.

To outsiders, Samaritan and Jewish beliefs were quite similar, but Samaritans and Jews argued over the differences, just as many Christians today contend vigorously or even violently with others of the 'same' Christian religion over issues that seem trivial to outsiders. There were differences in the books accepted in their scriptures, and the Samaritans had intermarried with the pagans. Sound familiar?! Often Jews traveling between Judah in the south and Galilee in the north would avoid going through Samaria by crossing the Jordan River. Our passage says Jesus "had" to go through Samaria. He HAD to go for God's purposes to be fulfilled.

Jesus was tired and asked the woman for a drink, thus beginning an incredible dialogue, with elements of both dispute and wonder. Jesus asserted that He could offer her God's GIFT of living water (fresh, flowing water, not still, from a cistern), so she would never be thirsty again. She literalized Jesus' metaphor, thinking

that she wouldn't have to keep coming to draw water DAILY from the well. But the LIVING water Jesus GAVE is "a spring of water gushing up to ETERNAL LIFE (v 14). Remember that in John's gospel, eternal life begins NOW, to all who entrust their lives to God through Jesus. The water Jesus offered to the Samaritan woman was superior to the water of Jacob's well, just as Jesus Himself is superior to their common ancestor Jacob. In John 6, in the Bread of Life Discourse, we are told that the bread that God GIVES through Jesus is superior even to Moses' manna. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'" (6:35).

The woman calls Jesus a PROPHET (v.19), since He supernaturally knew so much about her – that she had already had 5 husbands and was living with a guy she wasn't married to. Surely such an insightful prophet could clarify the dispute between Samaritans and Jews over where and how to worship God. "This mountain" (v. 20) is Gerizim. Jesus asserted "Salvation is from the Jews." (v. 22). There would come a time when "the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." (v. 23). The woman responded: "I know that Messiah is coming....He will proclaim all things to us." (v. 25). Jesus said, "I am He", identifying Himself as Messiah/Christ (vv. 25-26). Both Messiah and Christ mean God's Anointed One.

Then the woman ran off and told her people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can He?" (V. 29). Samaritans didn't believe that the Messiah would be a king in the line of David, as Jews did; their model was more that of a Restorer, a prophet like Moses. But it is significant that so early in the Fourth Gospel, Samaritans referred to Jesus as "messiah" and "the Savior of the world," (vv. 29, 42) long before many of Jesus' fellow Jews did. BECAUSE OF THE WOMAN'S TESTIMONY, several other Samaritans believed in Him. Even more believed when Jesus Himself spent some time with them. (vv 39-42). In John, to believe is to trust someone, to place our confidence in them so much that we entrust our life into their hands. All of this comes about because we believe that who they are and what they say are trustworthy and true.

Our text reminds us that even shady ladies – and dubious gentlemen – who have met Jesus can invite others to 'come and see' Him (4:299; 1:46), with the result that many will believe in Him. The Samaritans' surprisingly good response to her and to Jesus was a ready illustration of what Jesus had just told His disciples about His and their work of gathering the ready-to-reap harvest of people for eternal life. (all taken from HOMILETICS ONLINE, March-April 2023, 8-9)

OK, so this reading is paired with the story of water from the rock in Exodus, and makes a major point (my second – and LAST CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?!). That God is trustable and does not forsake His people – even when they have forsaken Him. God did not give them their just deserts and desert them in the desert, though they deserved desertion. (I stole that! – too good to pass up! What a crazy marvel the English language is!) The Jews in the desert wanted water more than they wanted God, which was foolish because God would give them water, but water would not give them God. They were invited to put the spiritual water of faith and hope and love first at all times, but they kept faith with God only during the good times, when water was abundant, and not in the hard times, when it was scarce. That's why the place was called "Massah," which means "a test" or "a trial." They failed the trial, but God did not.

All living things need water. The symbolic point here is that the physical water symbolized the spiritual water of supernatural life, which only God can give. It's the same symbolism we find in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. We see why these readings are so appropriate for the preparation of the Elect – but also a challenge to those of us who have been lukewarm, half-hearted, or just coming to church because our parents make us. What we all really, deep-down want, is God, His grace, His love, His mercy,

whether we realize it or not. We do not want to come to the end of our life and realize that we have wasted it on things so much less than God.

But where does the water of supernatural life come from? From Christ. The reality is that we don't automatically inherit Christ just by being part of a chosen people, or a visible church, or even a religious family, or even just by receiving sacraments, without effort and faith. Receiving the sacraments is not like a wall receiving paint. It's like a lover receiving a kiss. It requires a response. The sacraments are not magic, not automatic salvation tickets. They are gifts, and gifts must be freely accepted as well as freely given. The sacraments must be accepted with faith and hope and love, and a desire to serve our brothers and sisters. And these are all free choices. If we just receive the Eucharist or Confirmation, and it does not change our lives for the better, and change the lives of those around us – especially the poor -- we are like the wall that only gets the paint. We are kissed by God in these sacraments – but what do we give in return -- for the kiss of God? (adapted from Kreeft, FOOD FOR THE SOUL, p. 191-192)