

Sermons at St Paul's

The Third Sunday of Lent

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us acknowledge that we live in difficult times. Our world is changing in front of our eyes. Perhaps this makes you afraid, or angry, or you might be grieving – perhaps some of each. But there is a sneaky little temptation hidden in what may be justifiable anger, grief or fear, and it is called resentment.

I'm not talking about anger that confronts injustice, genuine grief and justified fear for your family or your own future needs. They don't usually engender resentment. I'm talking about old-fashioned human chip-on-the-shoulder, lower lip stuck out, sulky, brooding resentment. There's a whole lot of it around now, and we need to be very careful that we don't get sucked into it. Resentment is a subtle form of distrusting God. The refusal to give in to it is a Lenten discipline that is particularly suited for our times.

The Israelites in this morning's Old Testament lesson are doing this, in the face of their thirst. Despite having prayed to God to rescue them from their slavery in Egypt, and agreeing to follow Moses out of Egypt, they are now bitterly complaining: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

Now let's admit that having no water is a serious matter, and not having found water at the camping ground made their complaint justified. But rather than beginning an active search for water, they got angry at Moses and God. They resented God and the prophet who had answered their prayers for release from slavery.

This is such a common human characteristic, that St. Theresa of Avila commented on it: "*People are very willing to take all the good things that God sends them, but as soon as God asks for a little back, they start to complain and ask why God is mistreating them.*" It is like giving up chocolate for Lent, and then blaming God because you can't have any.

In our long reading from John's gospel this morning, we hear about a Samaritan woman outside the town of Sychar, at Jacob's well. The story is fascinating because – as

you may already know – there are several things “wrong” with it. Jesus shouldn’t have been there, but he was returning to Galilee from Judea, and this was a short cut. And so, in the heat of the day, he met a woman at Jacob’s well. And Jacob’s well was on Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worshipped, rather than in Jerusalem.

Women did not go for water in the middle of the day, and they did not go alone – it wasn’t decent for a woman to be out alone. Also, the woman was Samaritan, and Jews held Samaritans’ blended religion in contempt, for they did not worship according to the strict laws taught by the priests in Jerusalem. So Jesus probably should not have said anything to her at all.

Maybe that is why Jesus addresses her so curtly: ***“Give me a drink.”*** And she gives it right back to him – can’t you just see her with her hand on her hip? “How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a woman of Samaria, to give you a drink?” In other words, let’s get this on an even footing – you are a Jew; you are a male; are you making a demand of me, a Samaritan woman? Then she has a clear choice. She can move from here into resentment and stalk off, or she can have compassion and give him his water.

Now we come to the interesting part. Was it just exhaustion and frustration that made Jesus tell her about living water? Or did he see something quite astonishing about this free spirited and cheeky woman who also had compassion and gave him a drink? I think he did sense her inner core – her indomitable love of life and God, her yearning for a world transformed by love. All he had to do was mention living water, and she was on it like a flash. Though for the sake of the story, we do not learn for several more sentences that she is a woman who loves well and perhaps too easily, we get the rhythm of the repartee between them, as she learns that this amazing man is the promised Messiah.

Now John’s gospel is not like Mark’s, where Jesus is constantly telling people not to tell anyone about who he is. But still, for Jesus to identify himself to a Samaritan woman of doubtful virtue was a big surprise to his disciples. Why did he do it?

You know, I think it was because she understood love. She may not have been considered the purest example of womanly virtue in Sychar, but there were plenty of people who thought she was a loving person. And perhaps it just takes love to recognize Jesus when we meet him. So she raced into town to tell everyone the good news. She

did not race into town and tell everyone angrily about the arrogant man who demanded water from her peoples' well.

Jesus looked around at the Samaritan land and people from the slopes of Mount Gerizim, and said: ***“See how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life.”***

We are now entering the middle of Lent. There are weeks to go before Easter, and temptations to lose heart abound. Perhaps the Lenten discipline you undertook has failed to give you any sense that you are drawing closer to Jesus. Are you resenting God because God took away your chocolate? It is so easy to forget that much of what we bring on ourselves is of our own making.

Yes, Easter is a month away. And somewhere in this mess, there is a path that leads to Jesus. How will we find Jesus? Love. How did the Samaritan woman find Jesus? Love. And what is the spring of water leaping up to eternal life? Love.

Night, doubt, uncertainty, privation, even winter snows, melt in the heat of the sun and the warmth of love. Better to love too easily and too much like our Samaritan woman than never to know love's power.

What would our own lives look like if we viewed them through the lens of love? Would we see the many blessings we enjoy each day? The ways in which our lives are made easier and more comfortable by the labor of others? Would we see the food in the cupboard and the clean safe water in the faucet? Would we notice the ebb and flow of life around us, both natural and human? Dare we fall into the temptation of resentment and miss seeing these blessings for what they are?

Like a new glasses' prescription, we can see more sharply with the eyes of love than with the eyes of resentment, for angry eyes are inward-turning, and see only what has been taken away. St. Theresa of Avila knew well that if we stay focused on all that God has given us, and all that Jesus offers us, we will not have room in our sight for what God asks back. We will give it willingly to Him who has given us so much.

And here is the most amazing thing of all about deciding to see the world with the eyes of love. Like the Samaritan woman, we will be ready to see our Messiah, our risen Jesus, when he comes. Yes, the path becomes clearer with the eyes of love.

Amen.