

3rd Sunday of Lent

It is said that the next major war will be fought over water and not oil. There are growing concerns over the increasing demand for fresh, clean water as the supply is decreasing. The talk of ensuring access to safe water for every human being leads us to the reflection on the thirst for living water. A thirst could be physical or spiritual. It was physical thirst that made the people of Israel grumble against Moses. It was physical thirst that brought the Samaritan women to the well. It was physical thirst that made Jesus wait at the well. It can be the ordinary things of our life that can lead to our transformation and conversion. Pay attention to the ordinary things you do and ask what God is trying to tell you through that. The Samaritan woman had also an inner thirst—a spiritual thirst. By the time she met Jesus, she was into her sixth marriage and perhaps frustrated still and looking for her seventh one. Numbers are significant. Biblically, the number six is a number of imperfection and deficiency. Jesus comes into her life as the seventh man. She opens up to him and finally she experiences the satisfaction for the longing of her heart. Her spiritual thirst is satisfied. Then she turned around in her life and experienced a profound conversion.

To reach that profound conversion, we have to break man-made boundaries. Human society organizes itself by erecting boundaries based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, cast and so on. Years ago, some people could not vote—some were slaves. Even today, women in some parts of the world cannot vote or drive. The Hindu society lets you do things based on the cast you belong to. In the Gospel of today, Jesus shows that in order to reach out to others and create the necessary conditions for conversion, we must be prepared to challenge the man-made boundaries and break the dividing walls of prejudice. According to the customs of the time, Jews were not supposed to interact with Samaritans, let alone ask for a drink. That is why the woman in the Gospel was shocked when Jesus asked her for a drink of water. The disciples were surprised that Jesus was talking to a woman. No respected rabbi was expected to talk to a woman in public.

Jesus engaged this woman in a long conversation. There is nowhere else in the Bible where Jesus holds such a lengthy conversation. Maybe the woman loved talking. Most women do—and some men as well. There was a woman who walked into her kitchen and found her husband walking around with a fly swatter. “What are you doing?” She asked. “Hunting flies,” he responded. “Have you killed any?” she asked. “Yep, three males and two females,” he said. Intrigued, his wife asked him, “How can you tell which is which?” He responded, “Three were on a beer can, and two were on the phone.”

Jesus went against the man-made boundaries of the day to help the Samaritan woman in the process of conversion. If Jesus had kept himself within the boundaries of the expected behavior of his day, the woman would have remained the same. Jesus never tries to threaten, condemn or intimidate. Instead he tries to invite, challenge and affirm. Jesus was able to make a deep impact on her because he was able to break the man-made boundaries and expose the woman to truth. In her excitement she forgot about her physical thirst. She left the water jar at the well and ran back to the village to invite the villagers to come to see the man who had told her everything she had done. The convert became a missionary bringing others to Jesus to experience a similar conversion. Because of that woman, Samaritans in that village received the Gospel. Jesus stayed with them for two days. Finally the villagers said, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world." Here you see the two stages of the conversion process: First, hearing the word of God from someone who has already heard it and had an experience of God; and second, making that one's own by having a personal experience. Lent is the time when the church invites its members to make their faith their own by having that personal encounter with Christ. We believe, not because someone has told us, but because we have known him and experienced him personally in our lives. In this Eucharist, we get to personally experience him by receiving his body and blood. May this Eucharist help us in the process of conversion.