

Cycle A: The Samaritan Woman

Alcoholics Anonymous provides a wonderful definition of “insanity”. “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” In the AA world, insanity often refers to the many times their members tried to quit drinking on their own power: failing time after time, but always expecting the next time to be different. Only when they admitted they were powerless, and delivered their addiction over to the Higher Power, did insanity stop and sobriety and serenity begin.

For the Samaritan woman, insanity also seems to be regular way of life. She has had five husbands and the man she now lives with is not her husband. She comes to a well for water and acknowledges that while Jacob and his flocks slaked their thirst at this well, she continually grows thirsty and keeps coming back to draw water.

In the Old Testament, wells were often the places where one found a spouse. In Genesis Chapter 24, Isaac’s wife Rebekah was encountered at a well, and in Exodus Chapter 2, Moses meets his wife Zipporah at a well while defending her and her sisters from hostile shepherds.

(Some scholars suggest the “five husbands” of this woman are actually five pagan gods of the Samaritans. In the patriarchal culture, she would have served each “husband” like a submissive wife. But pagan gods provided no satisfaction for her heart’s real thirst. See Moloney #18, pg. 131-132) If the “five husbands” are symbolic and this woman represents all Samaritans, or if she actually married five different times, the homily point remains the same.)

Today, however, this woman of Samaria encounters the One who can quench her thirst and bring insanity to an end. She meets the One who can lead her to true worship of the Father. This One will not be a spouse in the physical sense, but in the spiritual realm because “God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth”.

(Here the homily shifts to the local church and some examples of “insanity” need to be named. For example, how many couples seem to argue over the same issue repeatedly, expecting this time to finally settle the issue? How many people find themselves overwhelmed by a substance abuse, or internet behavior that is now addictive and destroying their lives? How many families are driven to possess all the latest technological items, only to throw them away for the new improved version? How often do we seem to blame one or two groups of people for all our problems: immigrants; bankers and financial managers; labor unions; liberals; conservatives; minority ethnic groups; and others?)

How often do we engage in these behaviors and attitudes repeatedly, always expecting the next round of behavior to finally bear fruit and leave us satisfied? And how often do we go back to this well time and time again, and not only remain unsatisfied, but find the water bitter and corrosive? Insane!

The Samaritan woman encounters Jesus at the well, and *most everything* she once held as true is revealed as another false spouse. She believed a Jew could not engage a Samaritan in conversation (racial prejudice). She believed a man could not talk with a woman in public (gender separation and inequality). She believed that her moral failures made her a permanent outcast in her town from which she could never escape (cold hearted and self-righteous).

But I said “most everything” is now revealed as false spouse. There is one belief she has held onto that has given her hope in the midst of all her failures, all her rejections and all her lonely dismissals of ridicule and shame. This belief comes in the words, “I know there is a Messiah coming. When he comes he will tell us everything.” This one belief sustained her in hope. This one belief is the one truth she would not let go of, and the one that freed her from all other lies that held her bound.

She goes back to town and evangelizes. “Come see the one who told me everything I ever did.” Everyone in town told her everything she ever did, but not like the way Jesus told her. They never told her in ways that opened doors for conversion. They never held out love that was unconditional and unearned. They never welcomed her in a dialogue that would open her heart to living water that finally quenched her thirst. “I know there is a Messiah coming. When he comes, he will tell us everything.”

What about us? Do we know the Messiah is already here? Do we know the Messiah lives in our hearts through faith? Do we realize that just as Jesus encountered the woman at the well, we encounter the Risen Christ in every sacramental celebration in the Church? If the Risen Christ is espoused to the Church in love, are we a part of that passionate love affair? Is there water that can finally set us free? Are the waters of baptism setting us free or are we remaining bound to what is false and idolatrous? Is it time to finally let go of those insane patterns of behavior, those prejudiced beliefs, the blaming, the bitterness, the cynicism, the fear, the thirst?

Is it time we place our real hope in the only belief worth retaining? “I know there is a Messiah coming. When he comes, he will tell us everything.” Jesus replied, “I who am speaking to you am he’.”

Fourth Sunday of Lent: The Man Born Blind

Although Jesus heals the blind throughout the Gospels (Mark 10:46-52; Matthew 20:29-34; Luke 18: 24-43), this account from St. John's Gospel differs remarkably from all the rest. First of all, in other accounts, the blind cry out for healing and at times are persistent that Jesus can heal them. Secondly, the blind in other accounts already have a gift of faith, already identifying Jesus as "Son of David" and "Lord" even before they are healed. Finally, they respond ecstatically to Jesus' healing touch.

But in this occasion, the blind man does not ask to be healed, and has difficulty even identifying who it is that healed him. In fact, some would say his healing was costly, that it was in fact too costly, and he may have been better off remaining blind. As a blind man, he sat begging and seemed to be well known. Perhaps the townspeople had compassion for him and were generous to his needs. As a blind man, his parents recognized him and took delight in him. He belonged to the synagogue and was welcomed as a faithful worshipper.

But once he has his sight (something he has never known from birth), he can no longer beg, so he has lost his sources of income. His parents refuse to recognize him and keep their distance. And eventually he is thrown out from the synagogue, losing his community of faith and the only way of worship he knows. He loses all this for the gift of sight he never asked for in the first place. St. Theresa of Avila once was so angry at the way she was persecuted for her vocation reforming her Carmelite order, she shook her fist at heaven and said, "Lord, If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them!"

The fact of the matter is that so often our sight is so costly, blindness is preferred. If you will excuse the pun, "we see it all the time". Think for a moment about the horrible sex abuse scandal at Penn State University. The fall of the mighty resulted because a man in his late twenties allegedly witnessed, **witnessed** one of the assistant football coaches assaulting a ten-year-old boy in the showers. This young man (also a former football player, so no physical weakling) did not try to stop the assault, did not call the police, but went home and told his father about it.

The next day, **the next day** they told the head football coach Joe Paterno. From there it was reported up the ranks of university administration, and apparently no one called the police. Now, let's put this in perspective. This event in the shower allegedly occurred in March 2002. In January 2002, the sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church reached a fever pitch beginning in

Boston and swept like an all-consuming firestorm across this country. For several weeks, story after story of Catholic bishops covering up abuse of children and not calling law enforcement was at the top of every news show and the headline of every newspaper.

No one at Penn State University could have not known of these stories. They could not have avoided the multiple stories of some priests abusing minors, and often their bishops covering up the crimes and not calling authorities. They could not have avoided the public disgust and Catholic shame for these decisions. They had to know that these actions had rightly brought down public humiliation upon the Catholic community. And yet those at Penn State's chain of command embarked on the exact same pattern of behavior.

Why was blindness chosen over sight? Because sight was considered too costly. It was considered too costly for the institution's public image (both Penn State and the Catholic Church). It was considered too costly for those accused and those dealing with accusations, and it was considered too costly financially if these abuses were revealed. So blindness was chosen over sight. And because of this choice, the abuse went on and other children were horribly violated.

But let's not just put the blame over there with the bishops and university administration. These and other types of horrible events happen to other people in other places, and blindness is the chosen response. Abuse still happens today to some children in their homes, in their friends' homes, at school, and in other places usually considered safe. These children live with a terrible burden of feeling responsible for their own abuse, when they are never responsible.

Sexual harassment and wage theft happens on the workplace especially to immigrant workers and especially to undocumented immigrant workers too afraid to notify the police, or so desperate for a job they somehow tolerate the humiliation. Homeless people are often taunted and ridiculed for their plight. Students considered or known to have a gay sexual orientation are often bullied and taunted; and experience a living hell in school corridors and lunchrooms. More often than not, others witness or are well aware of what is happening and choose to be blind to these incidents.

Poverty rates are growing throughout our country, more children are hungry, and more families have hit bottom in an economic meltdown that resists all efforts to reverse. As a nation, we have chosen to cut food programs and other basic assistance relief efforts when they are needed the most.

Our extreme dependence on fossil fuels damage fragile ecological systems impacting agriculture from which we all eat, water sources we all drink from, and the air we all breathe.

Are we willing to **see** that if we do not change our habits of consumption we will irreversibly damage these systems of life upon which we and all humanity depend?

In all of these situations and so many more, we choose to be blind because our sight will be far too costly. We could lose friends and others we want to like us. We could lose our jobs for whistle blowing. We could lose our own sense of security for standing up for those that are being abused, bullied and taunted. Those of us still working might lose more of our own money when our sight compels us to open our wallets yet one more time.

The ancient church often referred to Baptism as “enlightenment”. The newly baptized were given an inner light that allowed them to see sin for what it really is, and faith for the power it is. They, along with all the baptized now see the world through the eyes of the Risen Christ and seeing calls all to responsibility.

Faith and blindness cannot coexist. Faith and sight are mutually indispensable. Faith demands that we see what is to be seen, and that we do what needs to be done. The man born blind in the Gospel, or more accurately, “the man who gained his sight” loses a lot for his sight. But he gains someone far more important. He gains a deeper understanding of Jesus’ true divine identity and realizes that value more than all he lost put together.

What do we need to see? What will it cost us? What are we going to do about it?

Fifth Sunday: The Raising of Lazarus

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said words to this effect, “The announcement of one’s physical death after a long life, too often is but the delayed announcement for the spiritual death that occurred long before.”

The human spirit dies as it becomes more self-absorbed and less involved in the care of and compassion for others. True spiritual life draws us out of our self-absorption and into the needs of the world around us. Physical death ends our life here on earth. Spiritual death places the soul in mortal danger of eternal loss.

When Jesus stands at the threshold of Lazarus’ tomb, he stands before all the physical and spiritual deaths humanity can experience. When Jesus calls Lazarus by name, the power of his word brings him out death’s embrace and restores him back to his family and community.

St. Paul reminds us in the Letter to the Romans that through our baptism, we share a likeness to Jesus’ death so that we might also share a likeness to his resurrection. The Church proclaims this reading at The Easter Vigil when the elect are baptized and all the baptized renew our baptismal promises. Our likeness to his death does not mean we get ourselves crucified. Our likeness to his death means that we enter the power of his death that destroys the power of sin within us and sets us free to serve God with loving service.

Jesus word breaks death’s grasp of Lazarus, but he has those standing around remove Lazarus’ burial cloths. Christian faith is not a spectator sport. Rather, Christian life is a commitment to walk with the Lord, die with the Lord, and work with the Lord to remove what burial cloths hold other people bound, and set them free. Our baptism expressed in loving service, reveals the great power of the Risen Christ over all the spiritual deaths of our age.

How many people live in tombs of fear of being discovered or having secrets exposed? How many people live with the painful memories of having been abused years ago, or may have abused others years ago and despair of healing and forgiveness? How many undocumented immigrants or people with a gay sexual orientation hide in the tombs of fear?

Like the man born blind, Lazarus’ unrequested miracle brings trouble along with the joy. Now, the religious leaders have decided that raising Lazarus means Jesus must be put to death, and in their malice, decide Lazarus also must die. After all, laws have been broken.

It is out of obedience to the Father that brings Jesus to Bethany to raise Lazarus. Now Jesus' hour has come and the raising of Lazarus seals his fate with those in power. Our work releasing those bound might place us at jeopardy as well.

Who lives today in tombs of darkness always fearing the unexpected and unwelcome chaos to their lives? Here is but one example.

In our country live hundreds of thousands of young immigrants. When they were but only babies or young children, their parents brought them to the United States for a better life. Even though their parents did not enter this country legally; for their children, this is the only country they know. They have grown up in the United States, have been educated here, have worshipped in our churches, and have contributed to the greater good with their moral character and youthful ideals.

Yet, they are always living in fear that at any moment, they could be arrested and deported back to their country of birth; a country they have no identity with, and have no clear memory of. The United States Congress has before it a bill entitled "The Dream Act". This Act will provide a path for these young people to secure citizenship in our country. There are challenging requirements they have to meet under this proposed law. But this act will recognize the fidelity they already show to our nation and heal their alienated status among us. The Catholic Bishops of our country strongly support this legislation and have worked hard to secure its passage. Many other Catholic organizations and religious bodies are also on board in this regard.

As all immigration reform bills, this one has been subjected to much hostile debate, scapegoating, and fear mongering. After all, some say, laws have been broken. However, some opponents are legitimately concerned that passage of this bill will encourage more law breaking. That is, if we grant citizenship to these young people, more parents will bring their young children here for that purpose.

The reality is that this bill will grant citizenship to those young people who came here without their consent, have been here most of their lives, and have played by the rules since arriving. Granting them citizenship will be a gift to our entire country, as we will be welcoming those who have shown good moral character, strong work ethic, and love for our country.

I dare say that type of welcoming these young people as citizens parallels our parish welcoming the elect to the Sacraments of Initiation in two short weeks. Just as they need the sacraments to cement their relationship with the church to worship and serve God in our midst,

so these young people need citizenship to cement their welcome and their rights as American citizens.

Just as the newly baptized will bring fresh life, committed love and diverse talents to our parish life, so these young people will do the same for our country as citizens.

Hospitality is the foundation of every Sacrament. God welcomes us and invites us to share life, deep love, and to know a purpose for our life we cannot get anywhere else. God passionately desires all of us to receive that invitation with joy, generosity and gratitude.

When we come forward and call out those whose lives linger in darkness and inhospitality, we not only bring life to them with God's grace, but with God's grace we bring spiritual life to ourselves as well. Jesus had the people remove Lazarus' burial cloths. Jesus had them set Lazarus free. There are no spectators in the life of faith. Spectators might live long lives, but their eventual obituary just might announce a spiritual death that happened long before.

Jesus calls by name all those who live in the shadows of fear and death. Jesus calls each of them by name to come forth. Jesus calls all these elect to the waters of baptism, the Sacred Chrism of Confirmation, and the heavenly banquet feast we call Eucharist. Jesus calls all these young people here in our nation without citizenship to come forth. And Jesus says to all of us, "Untie them, let them go free."

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