

Third Sunday in Lent
Year A

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

The contrast between the two people Jesus encounters in last week's Gospel and the Gospel reading this week could not be more stark. In almost any metric, they are opposites. Last week, we met Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, a teacher, someone who knew about the work and teaching of Jesus, who came to Jesus in the middle of the night. Today, we meet an unnamed Samaritan woman who has no prior knowledge of Jesus and whose life has not been a model of righteousness. Her encounter with Jesus begins in the middle of the day when she meets this Jewish stranger who dares to ask her for a drink of water.

To describe this woman as an outsider would be an understatement. There was a long history of disputes between the Jews and the Samaritans and most Jews would go out of their way to avoid having any contact with these people. She was also a woman in a man's world, so the fact that she is never given a name is not surprising. But, the most interesting aspect of these two encounters with Jesus is in the reaction each has to the message Jesus gives them. Nicodemus can not get past his own theology. He is stuck in mindset of reality and cannot grasp the metaphor Jesus uses.

The woman, although somewhat knowledgeable of the religion of her ancestors, is able to move toward the ideas Jesus is presenting. While Nicodemus remains unconvinced by Jesus, this woman fully engages in a theological discussion with Jesus and slowly moves toward His message. Her enlightenment is such that she runs off to town to tell her neighbors about this man. It is only then that she begins to wonder if He might really be the Messiah. In a sense, she becomes a very early apostle, having been told by Jesus to go and tell her husband what she had experienced.

Like the villagers who began to believe because of her testimony, but came to believe on their own after their encounter with Jesus, we also can believe, not because of what others have told us, but because of our interactions with Jesus. We could go around the room and many of you could tell of personal experiences you have had with God through Jesus. Whether it was through healing, or moving through a difficult period in your life, or just being able to survive to the next day, we all have stories we could tell about our encounters with Jesus.

It is not the scholar or the religious leader that has a monopoly on access to the transforming power of Jesus. Nicodemus didn't get it. But, an outsider, a woman from a cultural group despised by the Jews, was able to understand the message of Jesus and lead her entire village to have their own encounter with Him. We can join with her because of our experiences.

What did this woman really do? How was her testimony so impactful? She merely told them what she had experienced. She told everyone. She raised their expectations (could this really be the Messiah?). And, she led them back to Jesus. This is a classic example of evangelism.

Each of us has a story to tell. Each of us can go to the people we meet and tell them about our experience. And, each of us can lead people to Jesus. Evangelism isn't some magic formula we learn in school. It isn't some pressure campaign to drag people to their knees. Evangelism is just telling others about how Jesus has impacted our lives, how our experience with God has changed us. All we need to do is speak up. God will do the rest, even as Jesus stayed with these people and taught them.