

March 23, 2014
Sermon: La Gracia (9:00 AM), Grace Episcopal Church (5:00 PM)
Third Sunday in Lent
Year A: John 4:5-42
Michael Jones

El Tesitgo Improbable/The Unlikely Witness

Que las palabras de mi boca y la meditación de nuestro corazón sean aceptables ante tus ojos, oh Señor, mi roca y mi salvación. Amén. [Salmos 19:14]

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen. [Psalm 19:14]

There are a lot of messages packed in today's Gospel reading from St. John. After reading the passage, studying the commentaries, and praying and meditating about it, the message that spoke the loudest to me was about the place and plight of marginalized people among us. Those people who are discounted because they are *different*, and as a result, not valued – assumed to be unimportant, not worthy, and less than others; and, as a result: are estranged, separated, and held apart from the rest of society. Often such people are mocked, derided, maligned, and defined by those who would marginalize them through misconception, prejudice, and stereotype. As a result, many times the marginalized retreat into a place where the separation from those deemed acceptable by society only serves to reinforce and strengthen the misconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes that inform the cultural norms that each group holds about the other and engenders a sense of brokenness; thereby further deepening the divide between those who are marginalized and the rest of society.

As an African American who grew up in the late 50s and early 60s, I am well-acquainted with being marginalized; separated in many respects from the mainstream of society for no reason other than the color of my skin. Forced to use restrooms and water fountains designated for “colored people;” required to sit in the back of busses and relinquish my seat to any non-colored person who might want it; not being welcomed in restaurants, movie theaters, and other public accommodations – and when allowed to enter such places – having to do so through a back door or other entrance designated for colored people and having to sit or stand only in designated areas.

But let me suggest to you that marginalization is often perpetrated and sustained as much by the marginalized, themselves, as by the ones who do the marginalizing. All too often, we who are marginalized or discounted “*buy-into*” it, and believe that we are somehow inferior: less deserving, less worthy, and not entitled to the basic dignity and human respect accorded those who are regarded as being part of the mainstream of society.

Unfortunately, there is nothing new about being marginalized. Humans have been marginalizing one another since the beginning of time. In our time, in many places in this county, the color-barrier has to some extent been broken; even our President is an African American. Nevertheless, there are still too many of our brothers and sisters in Christ that are marginalized by society: immigrants; the poor; the homeless; people with physical, mental, or cognitive disabilities; those recovering from addiction; students bullied in school; those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered; anyone who is perceived to be different; and far too many other Children of God.

But in today's Gospel reading from St. John, Jesus bridges that divide. First and foremost, Jesus – a Jewish man, engages in conversation a woman. Not just any woman, but a Samaritan woman.

Those who may have witnessed this encounter would have found it strange. Not only because of the enmity at the time between Jews and Samaritans, but because it was not typical for an unrelated man and woman to interact in public.

But Jesus does interact with this woman. And, according to one commentary I read about this passage, it was Jesus' longest-recorded conversation with anyone; that too is significant. Jesus begins his conversation with the Samaritan woman by asking her for a drink of water. The Samaritan woman, perhaps fully-appreciating her status and station in this society, responds by saying: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Recall that I mentioned that sometimes the marginalized "*buy-in*" to the misconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes that inform the cultural norms; thereby participating in and perpetuating their own marginalization. But Jesus doesn't let the Samaritan woman go there. He offers her "living water," a gift from God, that, as St. John puts it, "will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life," and those who drink of it will never thirst.

Then, later in the conversation, in response to Jesus bidding that the woman go, call her husband and come back to receive the living water, the woman says she has no husband. Jesus' acknowledges this statement as true and tells her that, in fact, she has had five husbands, and the one she has now is not her husband. However, contrary to some current interpretations of this passage of scripture, Jesus doesn't mention the Samaritan woman's past relationships or current marital status as a criticism of her moral character or as an attempt to elicit her confession or repentance, and she does not take his comments as such. It is likely that Jesus is aware of the many circumstances that could have accounted for this woman's many relationships. As one commentator noted, she could have been widowed, abandoned, or divorced. And as heartbreaking or tragic as it might be, five times would not have been impossible. The woman could have been living with someone on whom she was dependent, or have been in what was called a *Levirate marriage* – an arrangement where a childless woman is married to her deceased husband's brother in order to produce an heir. But Jesus is not interested in marginalizing this woman.

In fact, this exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman convinces her that she is in the presence of a prophet, perhaps the Messiah, himself. Amazed by this encounter, the Samaritan woman, this *unlikely witness*, immediately departs and returns to the city to tell her fellow Samaritans about Jesus – this prophet, this Messiah that she met at the well. And, because of the testimony of this Samaritan woman, this *unlikely witness*, many of the people believed in him and invited Jesus to stay with them. And because this Samaritan woman was the conduit for her people to connect with Jesus and receive the living water, her people proclaimed: "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."

The living water, like grace, is a gift freely given by God. To fully receive it, like the Samaritan woman, we must not *buy-in* to prejudices, misconceptions, and stereotypes that would have us believe that we are somehow not also deserving of this gift of life.

*God of life, shower us in your living water, bring us to new life, fresh and clean. Walk with us as we share the knowledge of your living water with others, so that all might live. Amen.*¹

¹ *Prayer of the Day*, by David Lose