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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/24/2008, The Third Sunday of Lent
Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 95, Romans 5:1-11, John 4:5-42

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is from our Gospel Reading. It is the enthusiastic call of the Samaritan woman to the people of her village. She has left her waterpot at the well, hastened into the village, and given her testimony:

²⁹Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?(John 4:29, KJV)

Major credit for this sermon goes to my wife Carol, who loves this story and counts it one of her favorite stories in the Bible. Carol has meditated on this story for a long time, and I feel that I have learned a lot from her about the woman at the well. In fact, when Carol first walked into the beautiful chapel at The Wartburg and saw there the stained glass window of the woman at the well, then Carol felt at home. She felt that that is where she belongs.

Carol's great theme about this story is that it is an image of something that concerns you and me very much: I speak of the Last Judgment, when we will kneel before Christ and hear what he has to say of us.

Let's begin with some notes on the story. Some interpreters have suggested that this unnamed woman was a notorious sinner or a social outcast. One reason for that is that she comes to the well at the noon hour, in the heat of the day. The usual time for collecting water at the well would have been early in the morning, while it is still cool. That she comes at noon, they propose, must mean that she does not or cannot associate with the other woman – hence she is an outcast. A second reason stems from the conversation she has with Jesus. We discover that she has had five husbands and is now with a man who is not her husband – so it is supposed that she is a scandalous woman.

On the other hand, the text never actually accuses her of scandal. She might have been a widow five times over. She might have been cast off through divorce, though innocent of

wrongdoing. Anyway, when she goes back into town to tell everyone about Jesus, the people seem willing to listen to her and they believe what she says. They come out to see Jesus for themselves and come to believe even more. If she were a social outcast and a notorious sinner, the townspeople would not have had anything to do with her.

Still, the poor woman has some strikes against her as she enters into her encounter with Jesus. First she seems to be an unescorted woman, while Jesus is a man and a stranger to her. Second she is a woman of Samaria, while Jesus is a Jew. On those two counts alone, the rules of ancient civility were such that the fact that Jesus speaks to her at all is extraordinary. Whether or not she is also an outcast and a sinner, it appears that she has had somewhat of a checkered past, seeing how, as Jesus puts it, "...and he who is with you now is not your husband," and so it is even more extraordinary that Jesus would speak to her – except that Jesus is often criticized for fraternizing with outcasts and sinners. Now talking to a woman of Samaria can be added to the list of outrageous things that Jesus does.

So, this encounter between the woman and Jesus is, at best, highly unusual, and, at worst, totally unacceptable! And yet it seems as natural as can be. Jesus had been traveling and was tired and thirsty and so he simply asks the woman for a drink of water. She was surprised by his request and is bold enough to say so! Their conversation continues until she realizes that Jesus may

actually be the promised One – the Messiah.

Then, she is so excited and so eager to share her good news with her fellow villagers, that she forgets about her errand and, leaving her water jar there at the well, she rushes back into the city and exclaims, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!”

She did not slink away in shame, for Jesus was not ashamed of her. She did not make excuses or try to defend herself, for Jesus did not accuse her or blame her. No, he simply said, “I know all about you – I know you through and through – and even so, I love you.”

One day, Carol observes, you and I will meet Jesus face to face, just like this woman of Samaria did. One day we will stand before him and he will look into our eyes and we will know that he knows everything that we have ever done. Nothing will be hidden from him, not even our deep dark secrets, our sorrows, or our regrets. And he will offer us living water, just as he did to the Samaritan woman. Like her we have checkered pasts. We have done things that we shouldn’t have done. As we say in the confession at the beginning of our liturgy, we have left undone those things that we should have done. We are sinful and unclean! And Jesus will reach out his hand and offer us the living water that gushes up to eternal life. He will not condemn us, however much he instructs and enlightens us. He will show us his mercy and his compassion as well as his truth.

St. Paul says a similar thing in his own way in this morning’s Epistle Reading:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God

proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.(Romans 5:6)

Jesus loved us while we were yet sinners — not while we were saints, not while we were *beginning to become* saints, yet while we were flat-out sinners.

I think that Carol is right about this story as an image of the Last Judgment. One day we, and all humanity, will kneel before Jesus and have a heart-to-heart conversation with him. And judging by this story, we will come out of that conversation set on the right path, renewed and energized for eternal life.

In fact, this story of the woman at the well could well serve as an image for us of our right path now, in this day-to-day life. And that in two senses: First, this story shows us the intended divine trajectory of every encounter with Jesus, including our sacramental encounter with Jesus now. And second, this story teaches us how to minister in the name of Jesus to our children and to others in our lives. And its message is, “Do not condemn. Seek life, not the condemnation of life.”

Let’s consider these two themes. First: the divine trajectory of the sacrament. It is interesting to note that our *Lutheran Book of Worship* liturgy for Private Confession has no option of condemnation. I bet that is so in all worship books of all denominations. In last week’s Gospel Lesson, we heard that magnificent saying of Jesus, John 3:16-17. You probably know John 3:16 by heart, so let me remind you simply of John 3:17:

For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.(John 3:17, KJV)

Jesus did not come to condemn the world, neither back in the days of his

earthly ministry, nor now in the days of his sacramental ministry. Jesus does not come to condemn, and so the Private Confession liturgy has no option of condemnation. There is room in that liturgy for pastoral conversation, for examination of the sin, for admonition, and for exhortation to holiness of life. And there is the option of delaying the absolution or even of withholding it. But there is no option of condemnation in the name of the Lord.

And so it is also with this Blessed Sacrament to which we now come. The words of Jesus to you are fixed. I have no option in what I say to you in the name of the Lord. Jesus has already specified his message for you, and all I can do is faithfully speak it: This is my body, this is my blood, given for you, for the forgiveness of sin.”

And then there is the second theme — the theme of Christ-like ministry to others. This story of the woman at the well is an image for us of how we should conduct ourselves to others if we would follow Jesus in trying to help them along in life. Jesus did not come to condemn, but that others might have life — yea, have it more abundantly. So, parents: do not condemn your children. There is a middle path for you to seek. It is a path between condemnation and condoning. Neither condemn your little ones for sin, nor condone the sin. However tough your love might be, let it be love! Your fundamental goal in the life of your children is that they might have life and have it more abundantly. And you certainly might have to suffer along the way toward that end. You might have to suffer fear for your children. You might have to suffer displeasing them. You might have to suffer confusion and not quite knowing what you

should do in life. But seek that middle ground between condemnation and condoning. And if you should have your restless nights along the way and knots ‘aplenty in your stomach, then that will be a true example, I believe, of taking up your cross and following Jesus.

Likewise for anyone who would try to be like Christ in helping others along in life. Unless you have an official responsibility of condemnation, like a judge, for example, do not condemn others. Seek that your presence in life will be for others a kind of holy pressure toward life.

And now, as we come to the Blessed Sacrament, remember that Jesus is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Jesus knows us better — he knows everything about us and everything we have ever done or left undone — and still he comes to us with mercy and compassion, and gives us the living water that gushes up to eternal life.

This is good news — news that cries out to be shared with those who have not yet encountered the Saviour of the world. The woman of Samaria is our model. She simply went and talked about her encounter — her experience — with urgency and enthusiasm. Others came to see for themselves, on the basis of her word, but they came to believe because they too encountered Jesus. And so, while we can, while we still have breath in us and can tell our story, we should tell our story, following the example set before us today by the Samaritan woman at the well.

“Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” Come and see Jesus, to whom belongs the glory and honor, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen