

Third Sunday in Lent, March 19

The Lenten season is in full gear this week. Over the following two weeks things will start to brighten a bit as we draw nearer to Easter. But between us and Easter joy lies the valley of the shadow of death. We shoulder our crosses and follow this Jesus to Golgotha. Today we talk about the essential nature of a Christian, the common characteristic of all Christians: Humility. Perhaps a little discussion of humility is in order here.

We profitably start an understanding of humility by looking at its antithesis, pride. C. S. Lewis famously noted that the medieval Christians considered pride to be one of the most dangerous of vices. We do well to remember this. I used to tell my wife that I was the humblest person in the world. If that isn't enough to convict theology professors of overweening arrogance, I once heard this assessment of a professor colleague: "Nobody loves him like he does."

Woodworkers say that something is proud when it sticks above the surface of the piece. Unless it is a design element, the usual response to pride in a work shop is to get out the power sander. Pride is the person looking at self and counting on something that he finds there. Pride does not need help or expects that it is deserved, paid for. Pride will turn to the self and find sufficiency or at least a measure of sufficiency. I may need some help, but there is something that I can do on my own. Pride and grace simply don't get along.

Early in his career, Luther lectured on the psalms and he recognized the role that humility played in the salvation story. But even humility can become a problem, pride is subtle. For early Luther in his lectures on Psalms, he came to the realization that he was in fact looking at his humility and finding comfort in it. He was taking pride in his is humility. So corrupted is the old man, that he can skew such a virtue into a vice, and Luther came to realize it was a terrible vice. As soon as one starts to talk about humility, it ceases to be true humility. Exhortations to humility are foolish, because the very act of being humble as a form of obedience is denying the very fundamental essence of humility. As soon as I look at my humility to see if I have done it, the humility itself evaporates, replaced by either some sort of satisfaction in the humility – pride, or by the disappointment that comes from failure.

So just what is humility that one can preach and teach on this subject? Like faith, humility is best not talked about but simply talked. One doesn't talk about humility, one simply talks humbly, or better, talks humility without ever really using the word. For the humility to which Scripture exhorts and to which Luther was struggling is not a virtue so much as it is an adjective which describes the relationship between God and the sinner. It involves an awareness of self, of God, and the relationship between us. That awareness starts to permeate and govern the whole of one's life, imperfectly in this life, but it starts. We look forward to the day when perfect humility reigns in us. In this way, it builds on last week's readings. We are not talking about virtue here, but we are further exploring the relationship we experience, the relationship we call faith in which God saves sinners despite their sins.

In this faith relationship God is the actor and we are the acted upon. Like a sculptor working the stone, or in a better image because it is Biblical, like the clay being shaped by the potter, we are not bringing something to this relationship. God does that. Humility is, in this sense, more an absence of pride than a positive virtue. It is the recognition of our own incompetence when it comes to matters spiritual. Like a stone, we exist in a spiritual dimension but we are inanimate, we feel nothing and achieve nothing. God must breathe into us life itself or we will have none. Pride is imagining that we have brought something to the table, anything, to which God is responding in that life-giving act. That something most often is described as faith, or humility, or a decision, or an openness of heart, or.... The list goes on for quite a while. At Luther's time, the sinner had to bring his best effort, and, in the theology of that day, God "made it enough." But the horror in that and in all these things is that one always wonders if we really have brought the best effort, we always could have done a little more, after all. I could be a little more humble, a little more faithful, etc.

This is the reason we see much of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements today. They seek and find security in the manifestation of the Spirit. How can they know that they have actually made the decision and God has redeemed them? They speak in tongues. They have an objective validation of the relationship. They know that they have been accepted. (I also know that this does not by any means exhaust the reasons for Pentecostalism, but it is one of the reasons for the movement)

Lutherans are not immune from this either. We just tend to fall off the other side of the horse. We know that we are worms; Lent is our favorite time of the year. We are quick to tell everyone that we are worthless and can do nothing, and then we can assuage our guilty consciences because we are really doing nothing. This is also not real humility. For real humility also recognizes that God has indeed come to us, has indeed filled us with his Spirit, rendering us his very temple. True humility acknowledges the gifts graciously given us in Christ and does not bury them in some perpetual Lenten piety, but rejoices in them and puts them into service in God's kingdom. We have a boast which we may, even must boast in Christ!

Cultural bonus! Three years ago Armenio, who ministers in an Hispanic mission, brought in a really interesting point. Within the Hispanic communities, the word "Humble" means something much different. It is about being without resources, poor people are humble, ugly people, uneducated people, all sorts of impoverished people are humble. The preacher who has Hispanics within the congregation will want to take care when using this word. They are perhaps hearing something different than you are. He suggests this has something to do with the fact that the Latin American church has never really experienced the Reformation in the same way that the Anglo churches have.

We wondered whether the English or the Spanish speaker uses the word humble is really biblical. The Biblical use of humble may at times, especially as it applies to Jesus (Isaiah 53,

Philippians 2, etc.) may in some ways sound more like the Hispanic use of the word than the Anglo sense of the word.

Collect of the Day

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy, be gracious to all who have gone astray from Your ways and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of Your Word; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

In our situations, if God were to answer this prayer, what would we expect to happen? Do we see this globally, missionally? Do we expect that all of humanity would fit into this “gone astray” category and needs to return with penitent hearts? But that is a tough thing to say. All is a difficult idea – it certainly includes some folks we don’t like. Does it include folks we like very much, including ourselves? Of course. One can sit in church on Sunday and not really be there. Church itself can become a place of profound spiritual distraction so that we never even catch a glimpse of God there. The preacher, however, may also want to have a specific audience in mind. Why have they strayed? Is it only because of their sins? Is it because of injustice? Is it because of the sins of the church and this community? Are we talking about the children of the members of this parish? Are there some who are kept from Jesus (lost) because of things which are totally out of their control?

If you want to have some fun with this collect, choose to sing “O Christ our Light, O Radiance True” (LW #314, LSB #839) as a hymn in the service. It could go well with the woman at the well. But there is a great hook in this for the preacher to use. The prolific Lutheran hymn writer Johann Heermann did not originate the idea for this hymn. He got it from a poem he picked up from a book. He did not realize, however, the poem was written by a Jesuit named Peter Brillmacher. When Brillmacher wrote about people who were estranged from God, he was talking about Lutherans and other Protestants. It is on them (us!) that he prayed for the light of Christ to shine. There is more than a touch of irony here and I have to smile whenever I hear Lutherans lustily singing this favorite mission hymn, probably thinking about some aborigine or reprobate. The poem was originally about us!

You might also want to think about that opening phrase in which the prayer says that the glory of God is always to have mercy. In Greek this is pronounced “Doxa” as in doxology which largely corresponds to the English understanding of glory and praise. In the Hebrew, however, the word for glory is “cabod” and it does not really mean “glory” in the sense that most people think of it. The word actually means “fat” and at its root really conveys “heavy” or “significant.” Etymologists speculate that the wealthy or important folks in the village were the only ones who could afford the extra calories to put on weight. In truth in many cultures, heavy people are assumed to be important. I read once that Polynesians expected their royalty to be very overweight.

This idea then gets associated with our more traditional ideas about glory being the glorious light or something like that comes because the only people who were heavy in that protein deficient society were the wealthy, who could afford the nice clothes, jewelry, etc. This has real ramifications when one comes to the idea of God's glory, especially when it uses this Hebrew vocable. The glory of God is about incarnational presence, not his brilliance, his light, his "otherworldliness." In the Exodus story He causes his name to go before the people of Israel and the glory of the Lord is what they see. He causes his name to dwell in the temple to forgive sins, the people see the glory of God. When Jesus is born, the glory of the Lord shone around the angels. Many theologians have noticed that the Name of God in the OT is perhaps the pre-incarnate Christ. When the glory of God shows up, it is not a power event, but an incarnational grace event.

The glory of God is always to have mercy. Real power, real strength, real majesty is not reactive, but proactive. God is impressively impassive before all our attempts to buy from him. His favor is simply not for sale, but it is freely given. This is the glory of God. He gives his mercy freely to those in need.

We ask him to be gracious to all those who have gone astray from His ways. This merits a little attention. Who is this? Is it everyone? Is it the people who have abandoned the faith? Is it the vast majority of Lutheran confirmands who make their vows and then disappear for years, perhaps to return with a child and spouse in tow, perhaps never to return to any church? Is this about the people living under the bridges or sunk in some alcoholic stupor or narcotic haze? Is it simply a way to talk about every sinner? It could be any of them; it could be all of them. The preacher will want to think about this. To identify them as people "out there" might be on one level honest, but it might also feed that natural human predilection to pride. The prayer might be spoken like the Pharisee in the parable by Jesus.

We want them to come with penitent hearts and steadfast faith. Is there a difference? What is it? Or is this really a way of saying the same thing?

We want them to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of God's Word, that would be Jesus, don't you think? Is this embracing and holding fast really the same thing as the penitential heart and steadfast faith? Are these really just four phrases which describe the same amazing relationship which we proclaimed last week in the story about Abraham? I tend to think so. See these not as progressions but in parallels. Thus penitent hearts, steadfast faith, embracing the Word, holding fast to the Word are each different descriptions of the same thing – humble faith.

Readings

Exodus 17:1-7

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to

drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?”³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”⁴ So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.”⁵ And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.”⁶ Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.⁷ And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

The wilderness of Sin is simply an accidental homonym in English. It is not related to the religious understanding of Sin.

The people are thirsty. Their reaction to this reality seems odd. They had received manna and quail in the chapter before. They crossed the Red Sea in chapter 14. Why not just ask, but instead they accuse. Moses’ response to this is also most strange. What are they supposed to do if there is no water? Perhaps the quarreling is the issue here, but the request seems like something reasonable. The concluding verse says they are asking the wrong question. Instead of asking what God will do, they question whether the Lord is in this place. Did they follow the wrong pillar of cloud? These Exodus and Numbers stories often paint the Israelites into a strange caricature of almost child-like obstinacy.

Moses in turn throws this into the teeth of God. He doesn’t fare any better in these stories.

God in turn comes with a solution. Moses takes the staff and with God standing before him, on the rock, draws water from the rock. The words for quarrelling and testing have a sense of bitterness about them. It seems to have been pretty hard water that came from the rock. They did not name it “sweetness” and “refreshment.”

What to make of this. This is very early in the exodus event. The people in the immediate chapters before crossed the red sea and escaped Pharaoh. They have eaten manna in chapter 16, yet they get to a waterless place and they wonder if God has evil intent or if God can help them in this dry place. How stupid can they be? They have seen God inflict plagues and bring blessings which astounded them. Yet, they wonder if God can show up with a little water when they are thirsty.

Of course, the same can be said of us. How often don’t we experience the blessings of God and then immediately start to question the goodness of God when life gets a little tough, when times of testing come to us. We are not that different from these people as we would like to imagine. Like petulant teenagers who slam the door on the bedroom that their father has purchased for them, wearing the clothes that their father has purchased for them, driving their father’s car on his gas, we can rail against the mean-ness of God if things don’t go our way.

God's goodness to us is a matter of grace. The people don't know how to ask, but God gives them what they need anyway. Don't look to us, not even to our gratefulness for an efficient cause of God's grace. He is not reacting to anything in us that moves him to love us. He does not find something attractive in you or me, not even faith. He delights in the good you do, he loves the praises you sing, but that is not why he loves you. He smiles upon our endeavors to please him and encourages them. He would that we do more, but this is not why he loves us. The crude drawings my toddlers brought to me were indeed precious, but not for their artistic value, but because they were gifts born of love for me. God delights to see the love he has given returned, even in our crude attempts at goodness. And when the toddlers screamed and pouted, I loved them then too. God's love does not evaporate because we have failed to love him in return very well. It just doesn't depend on us at all. It is his majestic gift to give, and he gives it freely, to the humble and the proud, to sinners of every stripe. We heard last week that God loves the whole world, even the stinkers. That is really good news because too often I have been a stinker.

Psalm 95:1-9

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

³ For the LORD is a great God,

and a great King above all gods.

⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;

the heights of the mountains are his also.

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land.

⁶ Oh come, let us worship and bow down;

let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

⁷ For he is our God,

and we are the people of his pasture,

and the sheep of his hand.

Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,

as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

⁹ when your fathers put me to the test

and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation

and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart,
and they have not known my ways."

¹¹ *Therefore I swore in my wrath,
“They shall not enter my rest.”*

You can see why they might have lopped those last two verses off this psalm for worship purposes. But I think the preacher and worship planner needs to keep them in mind, if for no other reason than the inquisitive worshipper may notice it and have a question. But the preacher has another reason to keep this in mind. This is Law, hard Law. When the preacher sees hard Law like that he will start to look for really potent Gospel.

For those of you who still sing Matins or remember singing it. This psalm forms the basis for the ancient Christian hymn we call simply “Venite” which is the first word in Latin. If you have not sung it in a while, you might just dig it out. It is quite permissible to sing it any time, even on Sunday between readings.

Romans 5:1-8

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul understands that God is not responding to our goodness, he is saving us despite our badness, despite the real evil that has lurked in our hearts every day of our lives. The salvation of God comes to us in our weakness, while we are sinners. This means that even in our weakness, in the things that we naturally perceive of as bad, perhaps the suffering we bring on ourselves because of our own foolishness, we can rejoice. God has died for the lot of it. Suffering is no longer seen as a punishment from God but a bit of pedagogy. He is working through these things to help and heal too. It doesn't feel like that at the time, and I would not recommend telling this to folks who are suffering, but you can prepare them for the suffering which comes to us all. You can give them perspective on past suffering. God was at work even then.

All this flows out of the peace that comes to us through the faithful relationship established in Christ. God's love has been poured into the emptiness of our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Lose the idea that this is reciprocal. God's love is not, it starts as a completely one way street, it starts on a cross where Jesus dies for the sins of the world.

This sounds altogether too good to be true. Christ died for us while we were enemies? Don't we at least have to show some inclination to be saved? Don't we have to at least ask him into our hearts? But then again, who would expect to get water from a rock, it is not supposed to be that

easy. You need to dig wells like Jacob had to, you cannot just take your stick and whack the rock and get water! You can if God is in that picture. Just remember this passage from another of Paul's letters about the rock which Moses strikes above. If you think you have understood this reading from Exodus, think again.

1 Cor. 10:1-4 (ESV)

I want you to know, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, [2] and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, [3] and all ate the same spiritual food, [4] and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

I have this image of a rock following the children of Israel around in the desert, some great boulder rolling along, pushed by some angel. Paul was simply reflecting the very careful reading of his fellow Pharisees who had noticed that the Bible spoke of water coming from "the" rock in two different places. Because the text used the word "the" it had to be the same rock, therefore it must have moved. Had we heard the Rabbi's talk this way, most of us would have scoffed at it. But here it is in our New Testament, from the very pen of Paul. The rock that followed them was none other than Christ.

Verse 2 has that interesting phrase: in which we stand. Have you ever wondered why we stand up for the Gospel reading or to pray? Not out of respect. That is what most people think we are doing, much like when a judge enters a court room. In the ancient world one showed respect by bowing down, and the greater the personage, the lower you bowed. The romans actually had a whole system which dictated the proper sorts of bows and genuflections to make when various officials walked past. We stand because we have peace with God, we have sonship bestowed on us. We stand by right. We are the sons of the King and stand in his presence. Of course, sometimes we kneel like a servant, bow, and otherwise fill that role as well.

The passage really dwells on the three gifts of God: Faith, Hope, and Love. They are connected and the relationship they have to one another is important. It is not that one precedes the others, but they are mutually reinforcing of one another. Faith hopes, and hope "faiths." Likewise, love is faithful and faith is loving. They simply are not found in this theological sense independently of one another. It is through faith, the relationship which God establishes through the Spirit that we are saved, but that faith is always accompanied by God's outpoured love and the hopeful expectation of God's goodness.

John 4:5-26 (27-30, 39-42) This is one of the most potent stories in the Bible. But it is long and the pericope system has endeavored to make it "fit" inside a traditional worship service. I advocate that you resist this urge. The simplest way to do this, if you are preaching on this text, is to wrap the sermon and the reading into the same event. Read, preach, read, preach, etc.

¹Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ²(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), ³he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. ⁴And he had to pass through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

⁷A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." ¹⁷The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." ¹⁹The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." ²¹Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." ²⁵The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." ²⁶Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

²⁷Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" ²⁸So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ²⁹"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" ³⁰They went out of the town and were coming to him.

³¹Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." ³²But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." ³³So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" ³⁴Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. ³⁵Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the

harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.

³⁶ Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word. ⁴² They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

⁴³ After the two days he departed for Galilee.

This is an amazing text which needs little or no preaching, it is sort of a biblical narrative sermon all of its own. But here goes a few comments that might be helpful to what you can say.

The reader should understand that John is very deftly manipulating material and names here for your benefit. There are clues that scream out at you, and if a little biblical literacy has grafted on the right sort of ears you might even hear it. Otherwise you might need a guide. First of all, consider the place. There were lots of Biblical events that happened around this spot, but John wants you to remember a well that Jacob dug. Jacob, it is not often remembered, was noted in Genesis for superhuman strength. He lifts the stone off the well for Rachel the first time he sees here, the standing stone at Bethel which has been found is massive,¹ he wrestles with God and wins, etc. But strength is not the only thing Jacob is known for. He was also a first class stinker. His new name given at the end of Gen 32 is "one who wrestles with God" or Israel in Hebrew. John wants you to think of the founder of the Israelite nation, not Abraham the faithful, but he has in mind Jacob the stinker whom God loved nonetheless. This is important. God loves stinkers, you see.

It was the sixth hour, noon by our reckoning and Jesus sat by the well, weary. Noon in Palestine can be a vicious time of the day. Think southern California here, not on the beach either, this was some distance inland. Hot, blazing sun, the time of day when sane people hole up inside the thick adobe-like walls of their houses, waiting for the cooler times of day to come. Jesus, however, was traveling and it was hostile territory, Samaritan territory. He could expect no welcome there.

And here comes this woman. For people like us who turn on a faucet and water comes out, this has no impact, but for the first century audience of John, who all knew the habits of peasant women in villages throughout the Mediterranean, they would have known immediately what this

¹ Of course we don't know if this is the same standing stone, but the idea here is that there was a massive stone at Bethel and Genesis claims that Jacob set one up there and the folks at the time of John would have connected the two.

meant. Women always went together in the morning to get water. It was community time, it was gossiping time, and it was one of the times when the women socialized in an otherwise very dreary world. No one got water at noon. It was foolish, it was too hot, it was... and here she was. Why? Everyone knew the sorts of women who came out at noon. It was the woman every mother in town warned her sons about; it was the woman who was the subject of so much of that gossip. She had probably once been quite pretty, but now deep lines marred her face. The young men seeking her were probably long gone. Now she could not even get a fellow to marry her any more, just someone who would use her, and she was too tired to care. I bet all of us have known someone like this. Every village has one of these women, every city has a street where these women can be found. She was here in the middle of the day because she did not want to endure the stares, the wagging tongues and the whispers behind her back. She was tired of it all, and so she came out when she knew no one else would be there. But today, there was somebody there.

Jesus asks her for a drink. The first move is his and he makes it. She is surprised. How can he ask her, a Samaritan woman for a drink? Jesus has opened the door, now he engages her in the real conversation (interestingly enough, it never says that he got that drink.) He has living water so she would never thirst again. She is thinking about H₂O, but he has something else in mind. Finally she makes the fateful request, the one he has been longing to hear from her for years. "Give me some of that water." She has no idea for what she asks. She may still be thinking of hauling this heavy pot of water in the heat of the day and be sick of it. She might still be looking for a way to avoid the women who come in the morning. Indoor plumbing keeps us from having to ask all sorts of questions of ourselves and one another. Jesus has something completely different in mind, yet just as essential to life itself as water.

In order to give her this living water, Jesus asks for her husband, knowing full well she doesn't have just one. Jesus knows; she has not had only one; she has had five, and is living with a fellow now who is not husband number six. The living water is not H₂O, it is the love of God given to a person exposed before his holiness and shown to be broken and sinful, and yet loved by him, despite what she has done. Jacob who dug the well knew that love when he wrestled God by the Jabbok brook many years before. By pointing directly to the darkest corner, the most withered spot of her life, her sexually compromised life, he is making it possible to give her the living water, for it is the full forgiveness of all her sins, even those sins.

She sets down her water pots and races back to the village. "He has told me everything that I have done." I can only imagine what went through the minds of the people who heard her say that, "Everything!?! Everything SHE has done!?! This I've got to hear." They had all been imagining the sorts of things that she had been doing for some time. She was the closest thing they had to pornography in that little Samaritan village. And so they came. They all came.

The disciples meanwhile show up and offer Jesus something to eat, and he is no longer hungry, he has been eating and drinking the very bread and drink of heaven. Just in case you are really dense and think this is all about real water, John disabuses you of that notion. This is about the

real water. This is why he came to earth, to save sinners; it is his very bread and butter. They wonder why he is talking to a Samaritan, but they are too dense to ask the question. Are you?

Soon the villagers start showing up. John doesn't have to record that conversation; it is the conversation that happens whenever the Gospel encounters the lives of broken and sinful people. He only tells us what happens next. The word of the woman has been confirmed. They have seen it for themselves and they ask Jesus to stay and tell them more. Can you imagine people begging you for another sermon?

This is an incredibly potent story. You might just tell this story for your sermon. Of course the kicker comes in where do you find the folks sitting before you? Are they the woman whose sins have cut her off from the society? Are they the villagers whose prurient interests may well be what brought them to meet the Savior? Are they gossipers who drove her out to the well in the heat of the day? Are they the ignorant disciples who gape dumbfounded at Jesus loving people they believe to be absolutely beneath contempt? Perhaps all three are sitting out there. Jesus loves them all.

Lift up your eyes, Jesus says to us. The fields are white and the harvest is waiting. God has ploughed and weeded and prepared a crop through the brutal work of his Law. People weep and hide, they are afraid and lonely, they have compromised their lives and they know it. They wait and long for someone who can tell them God already knows this, and loves them anyway. Notice, Jesus knew all about the moral failings of this woman. He said nothing other than a statement of fact. He did not try to make her feel badly or moralize. She already knew that she had a problem. That is why she was there, the names they called her in town, "whore" or "slut," were all too accurate. She knew it; she just did not know what to do with the truth. Now she encountered the greater Truth, the One who is the very Water of Life, the living One.

The other really interesting part of this is that Jesus chooses the least likely candidate to be his instrument of salvation to this town. If you or I would come here to change things, we would go to the town council, the mayor, the richest and the most powerful. Jesus starts with the outcast and the lowest, the woman who is the example of what not to do. Yet, despite her, he works an even more profound change than all the power and wealth could have done. This is just the strange kingdom of God at work again.

Law

1. We have nothing to bring to God. There is nothing about us to which he will react. There is no buying and selling with God. That puts us all in the same shoes as the Samaritans, whether we are good Jewish Lutherans or not.
2. Jesus knows the depth of our problems, there is no hiding from him. Before his judgment seat our darkest secrets are utterly bared. He knows and grieves over what we have become.

3. We have a serious God problem. It is real. Our sins and our death and our screwed up lives are all an affront to God. This is much more than moral, it is simply the way we are. We are thoroughly broken people. We don't belong in the company of God's people.
4. God's holiness does not abide by brokenness. His perfect Heaven does not fit the imperfect. Can you imagine living like this for an eternity? Can you even imagine living like this for 1000 years? If my predilections and inclinations are projected out over that amount of time, things are not getting better, but worse, if I am honest with myself. It does not seem heavenly to me, but downright hellish. I don't belong in heaven like this. I must change.
 - A. I can be blessed and blessed, and still doubt God. (Exodus 17)
 - B. I am an enemy of God (Romans 5)
 - C. I am at that well too (John 4)
5. Because I know my own failings, I cannot lay claim to being an evangelist. How can I think that I could represent this holy God? He may indeed love and care for me despite who I am, but my past, my ignorance, my ineptitude, all conspire to render me into a miserable representative of God. He must be somewhat ashamed to call me one of his own.

Gospel

1. God does not deal with us as we deserve, but as he loves. Our relationship with him cannot be thought of in terms of quid pro quo (something for something). God's love is never for sale, not even if we come with the impossible coinage of true faith or perfect humility, it is only freely given and he has lavishly given in Christ.
2. While one might think this weakens faith, it actually empowers it. Faith is not the one thing I got right, it is instead the thing God is making right in me and the vehicle by which he works transformation in my life and yours. If I share with Abraham, Jacob, and Paul, and other great "heroes" of the faith a certain predilection to failings of faith, that is not cause for alarm, but thanksgiving. God was gracious to them, and to me.
3. This also gives me new eyes to see the people around me. Jesus did not wait for me to get it right before he loved me; likewise, he is not waiting for other sinners to start behaving before he loves them through me. (This is actually true humility!) I have become a servant to scoundrels and perverts, to the grumbling Christians, to the sexually immoral and the self-righteous prigs who exclude them. That's after all where Jesus found me, in one of those groups.

4. As a forgiven sinner, I am then the perfect ambassador of God. Remember this is all about him. All my excuses for why I should not be telling others about Jesus are actually the best arguments for why I should. Am I ignorant? Then his wisdom will shine. Am I a poor speaker, then his Spirit will be glorified. Am I a great sinner, who better to call sinners to God's grace?

Sermon Themes:

1. Drinking at the well – (Gospel Lesson – That the hearer would drink deeply of the Water of Life – be powerfully loved and forgiven by Christ this day.)

We find all sorts of people at this well. It was dug by a stinker long before Jesus of Nazareth showed up in that hot noontime sun. The woman came and found the Water of Life as her sins were forgiven. Jesus instructs his idiot disciples about the nature of his love here too. We all need the water that Jesus offers at this well. Through her Jesus gave the water of life to a whole town of people. He found his own disciples as one of them, John, the Disciple whom Jesus loved and who wrote this book, reflects back on this amazing afternoon when the world was turned upside down. This same Jesus is gathering the same motley crew of people: sinners, stinkers, the ignorant and the dense. To them he entrusts his kingdom, pouring out the Water of Life, and smiles to see it grow despite them.

One could really parallel this text with last week's text. Nicodemus thought he was inside, but both he and the woman at the well were both really "in the dark" and both of them needed Jesus' words as much as the other. Nicodemus was the ultimate insider, but needs Jesus. The woman is ultimate outsider, but gets the same Jesus as Nicodemus. Nicodemus at the end of his little walk ends up in action – taking a dead body off that cross – an unthinkable act for a Pharisee. This woman who is a sinner and notorious reputation, she also is spurred into action by the overflowing love of God and she ends up as an ambassador to those people who has spurned her and rejected her.

Of course, some folks look for water in the wrong places. Some look for peace in drugs, alcohol, power, etc. Interestingly, Jesus finds them there too. We don't encourage that sort of looking, but the Jesus we worship does not ever give up on the folks we consider hopeless. This text would have us look on every broken situation with hope. The woman was looking for water at the wrong time. She doesn't really know what she is asking for nor to whom she is speaking, but that does not deter Jesus. He gives it anyway.

This sermon simply wants to tell the John 4 story with all its beauty and wonder. The text itself should be the outline and it really needs to be a narrative which you expand. You might think about having a lay reader actually read the story, halt it, explain it as you go through it. Then have them start it up again, stop, explain.

But then, when you are done with that, have the lay reader simply and beautifully read the story again so you hearers can experience it with the woman again. Say “Amen” at the end and sit down.

2. He Told me Everything that I Have Done (Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would disabuse the hearer of the notion that one has secrets from God and reveal the Lord’s gracious love to the hearer despite what he/she has done.)

The preacher will want to cast this story in a particular way. He will want to tell it from the perspective of the woman. It is a hot day in Palestine, as most of them are. A lone figure makes her way to the well in the heat of the day. She doesn’t go early in the morning with the rest of the women of the village come. There is a reason for that. She is tired of the sour looks, the whispers, or worse, the silence. She was pretty once, but that was a while ago, not so much in years but in life. Five husbands will do that to a girl. The fellow she lives with now won’t give her his name but demands that she give him her nights for place to live and food at his table. But it is Palestine in the first century and women are supposed to fetch water from the well. So, she comes at noon, when the sun has driven the rest of the women into the cool darkness of their homes. She tells herself it’s not so bad if you walk in the shade at the side of the road.

But today is different, she comes to the well and there is a man there, a Jewish man. She may be the village outcast, but even Samaritan prostitutes know that they hate the Jews and the Jews return the favor. This complicates things.

She needs the water so she approaches the well where he sits. She really doesn’t want to make this trip again, in the heat of the day. Besides, who knows how long he will sit there. She expects silence, longs for it, really. She just wants to get through this day. But this Jew who considers her whole people to be unclean dogs, who won’t even talk to a Samaritan without going through a cleansing ritual, this Jew asks her for a cup of water.

The Jew asks her for water. Stunned she expresses her surprise that he would even talk to her. He retorts that if she knew who he was, she would ask him for water, water that would quench her deepest thirst. Misunderstanding, weary of this daily trip to a well in the heat of the day, she asks for that water, thinking it is the equivalent of indoor plumbing. Little does she understand what she is about to receive when she prays that prayer.

“Go bring your husband.” “I have no husband.” “This true, you don’t have a husband, you have had five and the fellow with whom you live now is not your husband.” This is getting uncomfortable, she changes the subject, to something safer, to religion. Where is the right place to have a temple? It was an old Samaritan/Jewish fight. The Jew brushes it aside, neither of them will right for long. Do you mean the day that a Messiah will come? “I am that one.” Those words shatter her reality. More Jewish men start showing up. She

drops the bucket, did she ever give Jesus a drink? We don't know. She runs back to the village and grabs the first man whom she sees, "This man out at the well told me everything that I have ever done! Could he be the one?" She had him at the first sentence. They have all been wondering and intensely interested in all the things this woman has been doing for a very long time.

The story expands from here – the whole village believes, asks Jesus to stay, and soon tell the poor woman that they no longer believe just because she said it, but they have seen it. Even their compliments are backhanded.

The preacher will want to bring out two things which will address the hearer directly. Jesus knew all along who he was talking to at that well. He knew her sins, he knew her depravity and how empty her life was. She was the last person you would expect the holiness of God to seek out unless he was looking to punish and make an example of someone. But he draws her out to talk to him. He does not need to judge her life. She has already done that. Her neighbors have already done that. She doesn't need him to tell her how miserable it is to be the town slut.

Jesus knows everything about you too. He knows the secrets of your hearts. He knows what is behind the carefully constructed façade which is the public face of your life. I don't need to go digging into that. There are no secrets from him. My job today is to tell you that despite who you are, what you have done, what you are hiding from everyone, he knows, and he loves you still.

Today, in this lesson, through the words of the worst woman in town, Jesus drew an entire village to believe in him. She was not too vile or soiled for him, but became through his forgiveness and love the very vessel of his kingdom come, his will done.

3. The Kingdom of God – (All Three Readings: That God would open the eyes, ears, minds, and hearts of the hearers to experience and enjoy his strange, upside-down kingdom in which water flows from rocks, enemies are bought with a son's life blood, water is not liquid, and ambassadors are made from the lowest of the low.)

This sermon wants the hearer to leave the doors of Church today with sensitivity (eyes opened) to the strange and unexpected things that God is doing right now in the world around them and through them. We often expect that God should play by our rules, but Lent and Easter are a great time to upend that expectation, and enable the Christian to engage in the kingdom of God with hope and joy.

We might develop the idea of the idiocy of the people in Moses' day. They had just seen the crossing of the Red Sea. God had conquered Pharaoh's army and now they were concerned because they could not find water. Did they have no faith? Do we? The disciples in the section which is omitted from today's Gospel lesson are also simply blind to something. Jesus has to open their eyes.

When parched in the desert, who would look for water from a rock? When you are a Samaritan woman whose moral failings have isolated her from her village, who would look for acceptance and forgiveness from a Jewish Rabbi? When you are an enemy of God, who would look for him to give up his only Son so you could be restored? The world tells us that such things do not happen. Indeed, they should not happen. There is no water in the rock? Jews hate their Palestinian neighbors today as well. Powerful people do not sacrifice themselves for their enemies, they crush them. Look at Gadafi in Libya even as we write these words.

But God's kingdom works differently than we expect. It has come to us with grace and mercy and peace, Paul tells of God saving us when we were enemies to God. It should not have happened, but it did. But God's upside down kingdom does not end with the cross, it continues to this day. He is still pulling unexpected water from rocks. In showing us unexpected love, he has made us into the unlikely ambassadors, agents of his gracious love.

Through the Samaritan woman he effectively reaches that whole Samaritan village. They would never have talked to him except that she got their curiosity aroused. Had he walked into their village and started preaching, they most likely would have pushed out the gates of their village and told him never to return. So he uses an unlikely ambassador of grace, the town whore. The living water of his love despite her sins becomes a well of water that simply cannot be quenched. She left her water-pot, her reason for being there to begin with, and rushed back to let this water flow out to the folks she otherwise feared.

He stands before you today, graciously entering your life in the sacrament, speaking the same water of life he spoke to her and causing it to well up in your life so that you too may be his ambassadors. No, you don't have much for native talent in that regard, but that is not the point. She did not either. She was the most unlikely of candidates, as Moses was too. Remember he had been a murderer, a shepherd, and he stuttered.

God's kingdom is still upside-down from the perspective of this world. It should not work. But it does. Today he sends you out into this world to be an agent of his grace. Who will you invite to Easter services this year? Who will hear the good news this Easter because God is working through you? She goes back to folks whom she has avoided and is embarrassed to talk to. She simply tells her story, what happened to her.

4. Faith, Hope, and Love (Epistle Reading – That the Spirit of God would pour out into the hearers a full measure of Faith, Hope and Love that these words would define their lives and shape both their suffering and their success.)

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only that, but we

rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us

This sermon would simply work through this complex text and note the interdependence of these three gifts of God. Faith which loves and hopes, the hopeful expectation which flows from faith, and the loving faith/faithful love which defines the Christian life.

Faith – We have been justified by faith – Paul is building on the preceding chapters of this text, the words we heard last week about Abraham who trusted God, believed the promise that he would have a son, though his body was old, as good as dead, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Paul has argued that faith, not works is the mechanism here. God is not some divine vending machine into which we put the spiritual coin and out comes the blessings and favor and heaven we want. God freely gives.

This leads to a peace with God which passes our understanding. The woman at the well carried huge burdens out to that well, and she left them there with the water bucket when she ran back to the village in the heat of the day. Christ knew her sin and loved her still, he provided a peace with God which changed everything. And so she rejoiced in hope and stood in grace. Heaven and all the good things we expect, but also the grace in which we now stand. There is no sin, no fault, no problem, no nothing that is bigger than God's love for us. We cannot fail to pay the price, because Jesus has already paid the price. The bill is taken care of, now we just stand in that gift. This is faith – God is good to us. He has given us the peace which we do not deserve.

Then Paul launches into a discussion of the hope – it starts even with our suffering. We all suffer, it is simply so, but Paul can rejoice in it. Jesus suffered. Our salvation was wrought in suffering. Now it is no longer the punishment of God, because Jesus bore that. Now suffering becomes something else. It is never God punishing us as we deserve. It may be consequence of our rash and sinful behavior, but it is truly not punitive. Paul takes us up an ascending scale. The suffering produces endurance, character, and finally hope, the sure expectation of God. There are many reasons for us to think ill of God or to assume the worst of ourselves and this world, but we don't. God has carried the day when all seemed lost before. On a dark Friday we call Good when Satan's tail twitched with glee at the death our Lord, it seemed like all was lost. But it was not. Easter came. We are a people of hope. Every setback, every moment of suffering, every miserable day is a day that God has redeemed and I look forward to the good that God will work.

But there is one more thing God has done. He has poured the very love of God in our hearts through the Spirit. And what is that love of God? It is the very sacrifice of Christ, who loved not the lovable, but the unlovable, the ungodly, the fools, the quarrelsome Israelites, the immoral woman of Samaria, the idiot disciples, even the folks he has gathered here today. That is the love he has poured into us.

Faithful and hopeful, we now are love-ful. There is no sin out there that we cannot forgive. There is no suffering which God cannot redeem. There is no despair which God cannot address and transform into something beautiful in his Kingdom.