

Third Sunday of Lent
March 15, 2020

“How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (John 4:9)

I once heard a joke about a person who died and went to heaven. Having no particular religious preference, the person was offered a choice between Jewish heaven, Protestant heaven, and Catholic heaven. I do not recall how the joke was told, but I am sure many have either heard this joke told or have heard jokes told which were similar. Although the intent of this joke, or those told of a similar vein, is to arouse laughter, there is an underlying issue that Jesus attempted to address as He began to speak with the Samaritan woman. For us to grasp the importance of what happened, we must journey back through Jewish history approximately 700 years before this conversation occurred.

To refresh our memory, King David ruled over a united Jewish people around 1,000 BC. Through the inept rules of his descendants, the united kingdom had split with Israel in the north and Judea in the South. Around 722 BC, Israel and her allies lost a war with the kingdom of Assyria. The result of the loss was to see most of the people of Israel forcibly removed and “relocated” to another part of the Assyrian empire. Not everyone was relocated and those who remained slowly began to make new lives for themselves. They married and had families with the new Gentile inhabitants of the region. To our modern mind, this would appear a necessary action for those remaining given the circumstances. However, to the strict Jewish Rabbinical mind, those whose ancestors lived in the Southern kingdom, this action signified an abandoning of their Jewish identity. It was a mindset developed from a similar situation which befell Judea around 586 BC. The Babylonian empire invaded Judea and exiled many of her inhabitants. Yet, the difference between these two situations centered upon the fact that the citizens of Judea stubbornly held onto their beliefs and refused to intermarry. They did not want the possibility to arise of the contamination their Jewish/religious identity. They had no intention of betraying their identity no matter how long they remained in exile or how desperate the situation would become. Even after the Babylonian Exile ended allowing those remaining to return home to rebuild, they refused any assistance from the Samaritans, the children of Gentile/Jewish northern kingdom.

Returning to our Gospel passage for today, you can now better understand the shock of the Samaritan woman as Jesus began to speak with her. With His first word uttered, Jesus establishes a fact that we sometimes take for granted: Jesus came to save all. Again, not just a particular group, but all. I stress this fact is taken for granted because we have often heard people saying that only a certain community will be saved. Whereas Jesus sought to tear down barriers, others have exploited these notions seeking to gain power through dehumanizing the undesirable. What we see in religion, we also see in society - our group, not yours. Yes, it is easy to point out our geographical, cultural, and biological differences. Yet, they pale in comparison to one main fact: we are all human. We were all created through the same spark of life by the same God. As Christians, we should seek to remind ourselves of this fact while striving to both re-evangelize those who have fallen away and evangelize those who have never known “The Way.”