

Third Sunday in Lent – February 24, 2008
St Christopher Episcopal Church, Charleston, WV
John 4:5-42 – Our Samaritans

The Rev. Kent Higgins

Today's Gospel tells the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. At this distance from that event, and living as we do in a fairly enlightened Western society, there are aspects of the story that are easy for us to miss, that we fail to appreciate. So a little bit of background.

Stories featuring Samaritans are used on two notable occasions by Jesus. This is one and the other is the famous story of the Good Samaritan. To see the point of these stories, we need to remember a few things.

First, Jews hate Samaritans, and Samaritans hate Jews. Always have, and presumably always will. The problem is that Jews believe that God is to be worshipped on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, while Samaritans believe that God – the same God – is to be worshipped atop Mount Garazim. It is from the interpretation of “the right way” to worship God that their dislike arises. They're not arguing about which God to worship, or whether or not to worship God, but where they should offer prayer and sacrifice. But of such disputes are born long-standing hatreds.

So when Jesus tells the story of the injured traveler and the Samaritan who stops to help him, and asks who has been a neighbor to the traveler, the Jewish audience for the story has to acknowledge that it was the Samaritan.

In today's story, that audience would be shocked that Jesus spoke to the woman at all, much less carried on a conversation with her. Middle-eastern men didn't speak to women in public. Jews didn't speak to Samaritans, certainly not to

ask for a drink of water. And rabbis, Jewish teachers, would have died of thirst before taking the drink, for it would have made them ceremonially unclean.

And this particular woman was at the well about noon time, not in the cool of the morning or evening when the other women would have been there, for she is an outcast among her own people – a scandalous woman who has had five husbands, and now lives with a man to whom she is not married. She was out there alone because no one would befriend her.

And yet, Jesus not only speaks to the woman, he carries on a conversation with her, and most amazing of all, he offers her the gift of everlasting life – the “living water” in today’s story.

Jesus admits to this woman that he is the Messiah, the expected one. She is so engaged by Jesus and his openness to her that she rushes into her town, tells everyone about it, and many come to believe that Jesus is indeed the savior of the world.

The approach is so typical of Jesus. Time and again he turns things on their heads, does the unexpected, the unthinkable, over and over he makes his point that God truly loves his people, and that living water is freely available to all who seek it, a gift from the limitless bounty of God’s grace.

But as wonderful as that is, it’s not the part of the story on which I want to focus. Instead, I want to try to say how Samaritans exist in my life, and ask if they exist in yours as well? To try to see how Jesus speaks to us, in this story, today.

Samaritans and Jews ought to get along just fine – they agree on the major points of their religion. It’s really a pretty minor thing that separates them. Are there people in my life with whom I ought to get along, but do not?

Who are the people I dislike or avoid for no good reason? As it happens, our own Episcopal Church offers a fine illustration of my sin.

Let me tell you – not to convert you to my way of thinking but so you'll know – that I am a fairly liberal person. I think that if the church can bless pets as we do remembering Saint Francis, and if the bishop can go to Summersville Lake to bless the boats, then surely we can bless the people who are entered into loving and monogamous relationships.

Insofar as I can tell, Gene Robinson is an exceptionally well qualified person to be a bishop.

I think women should be ordained. And that bishops of the church should not be able to deny them the ability to practice their ministries in their dioceses.

Now before some of you start throwing hymnals at me, I'm not trying to convert you to my way of thinking. You can acknowledge, I'm sure, that there are people in the Episcopal Church who would agree with all that I have said, and others who would refuse to share communion with me.

Ah, do you begin to see the Samaritans cropping up in my life? I'm admitting to you that there are members of my own church, all of us professing to love and follow Jesus Christ as lord and savior, I'm admitting there are my fellow Christians with whom I want to have very little to do.

In my version of the Jewish – Samaritan argument over where to worship God, I have created a whole group of people with whom I'm not comfortable. Dear God, I'm claiming to be a better lover of my Lord than they are. If that's not a sin, I don't know what is.

Anybody else here with this problem? Anyone else who gets caught up in the politics of the church and forgets why we're in church?

And for that matter, is there anyone here who could care less about all this happy political nonsense, and just wants to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and so on? If there is, God bless you for understanding what's really important.

This past week I had an experience which, frankly, brought me up short. Let me tell you about it, not because I'm proud of it, but so that you may see yourself in some of this, and perhaps change as I am trying to change.

You may know the name of Jack Iker. He is the Episcopal Bishop of Fort Worth, a man who was called to that post from a church in Sarasota, Florida when I was living there. In good Jew and Samaritan fashion, I've never met Jack Iker, but I don't like him.

You see Jack – I actually call him by his first name – Jack won't ordain women. He worships Jesus Christ, as I do, but he won't ordain women, and so I cut myself off from him – figuratively, of course. Bishop Iker doesn't miss my presence, because he doesn't know I exist.

How can I, a Christian, dislike another Christian whom I have never seen, probably will never see? Well, you see, he worships God in the wrong place, just like a Samaritan. He is my Samaritan. One of many.

This week, I received an e-mail on a list to which I subscribe which quoted Jack Iker in a message to his clergy. The man whose positions so annoy me told his clergy that his thirty-seven year old daughter Christine had suffered her second serious heart attack, brought on by her abuse of cocaine and heroin. Prior to the second heart attack, the Christine had about twenty-five per cent of her heart function. She is expected to survive this one, but her prognosis is not good.

The message was a request for prayer for the daughter and her father and her mother.

And I was ashamed of myself. If Jack Iker can admit that his daughter is in serious trouble and that he needs prayer – my prayer – everyone’s prayer – anyone’s prayer – how can I dislike him?

I still think he’s wrong about ordaining women, but I also think that Jesus would not be focused on that if he met Jack Iker or Kent Higgins. Gene Robinson probably wouldn’t enter into the conversation. Who goes to Lambeth and who doesn’t wouldn’t matter all that much.

Jesus would expect us to be neighbors to one another. Jesus would expect us to offer him a drink from the well, and in return, he would offer living water.

The Episcopal Church that I know and love needs desperately to recover the civility for which it was once noted. We need to focus on what C. S. Lewis calls “mere Christianity” – the recognition that what unites us is much greater than what divides us. We need to pray to God, as this morning’s collect does, “Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves. Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul...”.

The gift of living water is ours through God’s grace. We didn’t earn it. We don’t deserve it. We can’t buy it. But it is ours.

My friends, if you have any Samaritans in your lives, take the opportunity of this Lenten season to see in them the redeeming love of God. And pray, in your mercy, for Jack Iker’s daughter, for me in my arrogance, and for our church.