



The Inclusive Community

Third Sunday in Lent

March 27, 2011

Exodus 17: 1-17 John 4: 5-42

True Religion

Homily of Terry and Fred Quinn

Terry

Today's gospel narrative is a long one, and as is often the case with longer stories there is an overriding message with several nuanced messages interwoven into the story. In the first part of the narrative we see Jesus on his way to Galilee, crossing over to Samaria; then coming to the town of Sychar, passing Jacob's well. He was alone, since his disciples had gone into town to buy food. They were obviously hungry having traveled for awhile. Jesus must have not only been hungry, but thirsty as they paused in their long journey. Without missing a beat, he turns to a Samaritan woman who was drawing water at the well, and asks her for a drink. Here we have the first surprise in the story. One wonders if Jesus intentionally sought to break down a barrier here. Certainly, the woman is surprised. She even says, "How can you, a Jew, ask me-- a Samaritan woman for a drink?" She of course was well aware that Jews did not associate with Samaritans, and certainly not female ones. (Not following the rules, this Jesus!) He then answers the woman's question with the second surprise when he tells the woman that indeed God can supply her with living water. She, taking him literally (oh no another literalist!) says that what he's saying is impossible because he has nothing to draw from the well with—and besides she says— ---who do you think you are?---are you greater than Jacob who gave us the well? Jesus then says that the water he is speaking of is living water--- that wells up from within and is eternal. The woman asks for this living water so that she will not have to keep coming back to the well. She does not understand that Jesus is not referring to drinking water which sustains us physically, but the water of the spirit which sustains us spiritually.

Jesus then connects to the woman in another surprising way—he tells her that he knows that the man she is living with is not her husband (this of course would be daily

news today) and that she has had many lovers, making the fact that he is conversing with her all the more remarkable. The woman is not just surprised that Jesus knows about her lifestyle, but that he accepts her. She then understands that this encounter is an encounter with holiness—and she decides that Jesus must be a prophet. So she asks Jesus a question (and I think to myself, oh good—another questioning woman and Jesus is patient with her—there’s hope for me!) The woman asks Jesus who is right—the Jews or the Samaritans—who worships in the correct temple? Jesus answers with his concept of true worship ---- not dependent on location, location—but a matter of spirit and connection.

We come now to the last surprise or message in this conversation that comes when the woman speaks of the Messiah who is expected and Jesus reveals to her—not to his disciples—that he is that Messiah. He has revealed this to a person considered marginal by the people of the time—a person not worthy of notice. But Jesus’ worship—or religion—to coin a phrase---was not dependent on laws, rules or the walls of a temple. It was an expression of his spirit, his connection, his relationship to everyone and everything in the universe—the essence of what we call God. So Jesus makes a barrier-breaking relationship of compassion and understanding, while the woman learns that she has value as a person—so much so that she will be the one to announce that Jesus is the Messiah. Though we do not know her name, this woman is honored in many cultures. In southern Mexico, La Samaritana is remembered on the 4th Friday of Lent, when water flavored with tamarindo, chilacoyota and horchata is given to commemorate her gift of water to Jesus. The Orthodox know her as St. Photini or Svetlana in Russian where her name means “equal to the apostles.” And so, in the vulnerability of an interdependent community , where everyone is accepted, true worship happens not on a sacred mountain, or even at an ancestral well, but in relationship where the divine spirit in each of us reaches out to co-create.—and we express God in this connection, this “religion.”

Fred will now tell a story about a woman, not a member of a “religious community”, but a woman whose inner spirit and convictions energized her to become a barrier breaker like the woman at the well and Jesus himself, whose “living water” connected to so many with compassion and justice.

Fred

Elizabeth Blackwell's compassion for the unnecessary suffering of women led her to study medicine in a world which had little interest in female doctors. She was born in Bristol, England, the third of nine children. She grew to be five- feet, one inch tall and was soft-spoken. Her father called her "Little Shy". Yet she grew up having a very strong will, with a desire to take on challenges along with a strong social conscience. At the age of 6 she said, "I don't know what I'm going to do when I grow up, but it's going to be hard."

When she was 11, the family moved to New York City. Her father believed in equal rights for women and made sure that his daughters received an education equal to that of his sons. For six years Elizabeth soaked up the social and cultural life of the city and was also socially active, attending anti-slavery events.

A family friend became very ill with cancer. The doctor was due to visit and the woman confided that she was very frightened. Elizabeth said that she would stay for the doctor's visit and if allowed, would hold her hand. The doctor entered the room, and proceeded to "bleed" the woman .The doctor took out two pints of blood, patted the patient's hand, and without a word, left the room. The woman said, "I would have been spared much suffering if only I had been treated by a woman doctor. She then said something that was eventually to have a great effect on Elizabeth's future... "My dear, you are fond of study. You have health, and a cultivated intelligence. Why don't you study medicine? Before she took her last breath this family friend had managed to plant the most unlikely idea into Elizabeth's head.

In 1836 a depression swept the country and Elizabeth's father lost his business. The family was reduced to poverty. The father decided to move the family west to relocate in "the prosperous little town of Cincinnati." But three months after the move, William Blackwell unexpectedly died, leaving a total of \$20 in his account.

To help out, Elizabeth began teaching music and English in the back room of the family home. Six weeks later she was joined by her elder sisters. The three girls opened a boarding school, The Cincinnati English and French Academy for Young Ladies.

At the same time Elizabeth studied history, German, music and metaphysics and attended meetings on woman's rights and joined a literary club, but felt restless, unsatisfied. It was then the words of her dying friend came back to her and those words would change her life. She would become a doctor!

Even though women did not pursue medical careers and the medical books were a challenge, Elizabeth wanted a first rate medical education so she wrote to physicians

across the country asking how to go about seeking entrance to a mainline medical school, only to receive negative responses.

She moved to Charleston, and met Dr. Dickson who invited her to continue her studies with him while she worked during the day as a teacher. She pored over medical books during the evening and after sixteen months she was ready to apply to the nation's leading medical schools. Sixteen schools turned her down. Then an amazing thing happened. The faculty in liberal Geneva Medical College in upstate New York put her application up to a vote. The high-spirited students thought that the whole thing was a hoax, and voted "yes". So on November 7, 1847, Elizabeth Blackwell, a short unassuming yet determined woman, reported to the dean's office at Geneva Medical College. The faculty was horrified and many students shunned her. Between semesters, Elizabeth interned at the Philadelphia's Blockly Almshouse an infirmary for the poor, in the ward for females. The resident physicians made her long hours there difficult, openly snubbing her and refusing to complete patient's charts with critical information when she was in attendance. Even some patients resented her presence. Yet Elizabeth remained gentle and courteous. She also took her coursework so seriously that she completed her studies in half the time and on January 23, 1849 Elizabeth Blackwell was granted a medical degree, having graduated first in her class. However, doors still remained closed to Elizabeth in her chosen profession. Determined to become a surgeon, and denied entrance into any hospital in the United States or England, she obtained a place at a midwifery school, La Maternite, in Paris. However, this brought her no closer to her dream because she contracted a serious ophthalmic infection from a child patient and as a result, lost sight in one eye. Amazingly, this did not dampen her spirit and she was able to gain clinical experience by gaining entry to St. Bartholomew's Hospital in England.

Encouraged by invaluable practical training, she returned to the United States hoping to find a physician with whom she could share a private practice as an assistant. No one was interested. Finally in 1857 her younger sister Emily who had become the second female doctor in America together with a German immigrant, Dr. Marie Zakrewska took a house at 64 Bleeker Street, in the heart of the slums, and opened the NY Infirmary for Women and Children. It was a hospital for women, staffed entirely by women. Within a month all beds were full. Despite the usual skepticism, and negativity, Elizabeth rallied enough support to add a medical school to the infirmary in 1868. Dr. Blackwell's school was the first school devoted entirely to the medical education of women. The course of study was significantly more rigorous than most other schools and eventually became the first school in the United States to mandate four years of study, and awarded a medical degree to Dr. Rebecca Cole, the first African American woman to become a doctor. The Woman's Medical College slowly gained acceptance and support.

In 1869, Elizabeth left the Medical School in the hands of Emily and returned to England where she helped establish The London School of Medicine for Women and also became a faculty member. Little Shy was a social reformer and spent the remainder of her years supporting many causes; woman's suffrage, morality in government, better hygiene, among others. She also published an important auto-biography, "Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women. By the time Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell died in May of 1910, more than 7,000 women were licensed physicians and surgeons in the United States. Elizabeth's "living water" –her indomitable spirit was never quenched and was shared in so many ways with others. Each of us can reach into that wellspring in everyday small ways and share our own living water. Perhaps the essence of the message that Jesus, the Messianic barrier-breaker tried to convey to his disciples, to ALL of us, is ---that we are all of the same "religion" in our acceptance of our universal connection, even with particles of the stars within each of us---and with the "living water" of the spirit welling up within each of us. We have only to say "yes" to the expression of it in our daily lives.