

Roman Catholic priest John Speekman writes that giving Mass in prison is always interesting. “The men are very attentive to what is going on and quick to understand my meaning,” he says. “I spoke recently about how it seems there are no longer any bad people who die. Everyone who dies was one of the best people who ever lived. They were happy, fun-loving, sociable, popular, and, invariably, would give you ‘the shirt off their back,’ and what’s more, they would now be ‘up there’—‘at peace’—drinking beer with their dead relatives or catching huge fish in their new big fishing boat.” The prisoners were smiling and nodding in agreement.

“I joke that sometimes I wondered what would happen if I mischievously said, ‘I think so and so was such a bad person they must have gone straight to hell.’ What would the reaction be? “The truth is that I am no more entitled to say someone has gone to hell than they are to say someone has gone to heaven. It simply isn’t up to any of us to make that judgment, one way or the other. Paraphrasing First Corinthians Chapter 4, verse 5, Fr. Speekman continues, “There must be no passing of premature judgment. Leave that until the Lord comes; he will light up all that is hidden in the dark and reveal the secret intentions of men’s hearts. Then will be the time for each one to have whatever praise he deserves, from God.”ⁱ

Premature judgment may come into our minds as we consider the Samaritan woman at the well; we certainly do make assumptions about her. Jesus sparks our imaginations when he points out that there has been a parade of men through her life. Five husbands and now a live-in male companion! Good grief! We assume that she is at least fickle, but probably promiscuous, that whatever has caused her to be married so often and now to be “living in sin” must be because of something she herself has done. Our assumptions come from our own observations of the world around us, and the value systems that formed us. But what if? What if she has been tragically widowed five times? What if the man living with her now is her brother, or her father? What if she’s coming to the well at the hottest time of the day not because she’s avoiding the judgmental looks and whispered gossip of the other women, but because she’s taking in laundry, trying to earn money for food and life’s necessities, and needs more water to finish her job? Well, you know they say about assumptions!

There are other questions we might also ask about this episode between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. In verses three and four preceding this passage, John tells us that Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee, but he had to go through Samaria. While that is geographically the true and obvious route, the disharmony between Samaritans and Jews was so strong that most Jews would go around Samaria rather than through it. For Jesus to ask—or rather *tell*—this woman to give him a drink was unusual not just because she was a Samaritan, but also because she was a woman. It was so unusual for a man to be talking with a woman he did not know that the disciples were astonished; yet they never asked him why he was speaking to her. She doesn’t speak first; Jesus is the one who starts the conversation with her. He is the one who is thirsty, yet he offers water to her. She recognizes him to be a prophet, and then identifies him as the Messiah, in truth that is not acknowledged by his own people. And she, a woman whose reputation is tarnished, is the one who is able to share what she’s learned with the very people who in the past have likely shunned her and normally would pay her no attention at all.

Despite our assumptions about this woman, assumptions that *could* very well be correct, we sense in her response to Jesus that she is, in fact, thirsty—thirsty for something that will set her life right, that will fill the hole in heart caused by lost dreams, bad decisions, hopelessness. As Jesus describes the living water, we see a spark of hope in her, and when Jesus tells her that he is the Messiah, she believes him. And then she tells others about him, saying “Come see a man who told me everything I ever did.” What she doesn’t say, but must be feeling, is that Jesus loves her, despite everything she ever did. He loves us, too, despite everything we’ve ever done. That’s what makes the Gospel Good News.

There's a word for that unconditional love from God in Christ: "grace." God's grace may be defined as the free and unmerited favor of God as shown in the salvation of sinners and the bestowing of blessings. Common Christian teaching is that grace is unmerited mercy or favor that God gave to humanity by sending his son to die on a cross, thus delivering eternal salvation. There is no specific mention of God's grace in the Catechism, the Outline of the Faith as understood by Episcopalians, but it is expressed, I believe, through the answer to the very last question there: "What, then, is our assurance as Christians?" The answer states, "Our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen." Even so, I often think that God's grace is too big, too mysterious for us to ever completely understand. So we tell stories like this one:

"There was a man who died and went to heaven, where he was greeted at the pearly gates by a heavenly being with a clipboard and calculator. As the man approached the gates, the gatekeeper said, 'Hold it there, Mister. You can't just walk in here. We have policies and procedures ... and I need to see your points.' Puzzled, the man said 'Points? What points?' 'You know,' the being said, 'the points you earned by the kind of life you lived on earth. You have to have two hundred points to get in here. So tell me, what did you do in your life that would have earned you two hundred points?' 'Well,' the man said, 'I was a member of my church for forty-seven years. And I was a Sunday school teacher for thirty-two years.' 'That's good,' the gatekeeper said. 'You get one point.'

'Let's see ... I was a good husband ... a good father ... I think my wife and children would say that.' 'That's very good,' the being said. 'You get another point.' 'Oh my,' the man said. 'Let me think. Well, I tithed to my church and I worked once each month at the soup kitchen. Plus I served four years on the board of the homeless shelter.' 'Excellent,' the being said. 'One more point.' By now the man was really starting to worry ... he thought and thought: *What else have I done that would earn points?* Finally he threw up his hands and said: 'My goodness, if I get in here it'll be by the grace of God!' 'Exactly!' said the gatekeeper. 'That's worth 197 points. Welcome to heaven!'ⁱⁱ

During this season of Lent, if we are giving ourselves to the practice of penitence and repentance, we might also feel that we are unworthy, unable to live up to the standards expected of us as believers in God and followers of Jesus Christ. This story of the Samaritan woman, a woman who by all accounts of her day could never be acceptable in the sight of the Lord, reminds us that God loves us and sent Jesus Christ to show us just how much. Aren't we thirsty, just as she was, for the water that will set our own lives right? Through this nameless woman, we're reminded that God's good news is available to anyone and everyone who responds in faith, believing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Remember Father Speekman, the Roman Catholic priest who celebrates communion in prison? He writes that after the Mass when he spoke about good people and bad people and judgment, he was "kept busy for half an hour hearing the confessions of a number of the prisoners." "If you come to Reconciliation this Lent," he says, "I promise you, you will not receive justice; you will receive only mercy. Your sins will be completely forgiven, once and for all, and you will be entirely restored to friendship with God. And then, and then, you will have nothing to fear from the Throne of Justice."ⁱⁱⁱ

Surely we could ask for no greater gift.

Amen and amen.

ⁱ Synthesis, Year A, Lent 3, Postscript. March 19, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.