

Once again we interrupt our readings from Mark. That's because we have catechumens preparing for baptism, confirmation, and first Eucharist this coming Easter. And when we do, the church asks us to explore three separate conversion stories from the Gospel of John on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Sundays of Lent. So today we focus on the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus at the well. But before we get to that, it's useful to consider what conversion means. That's because we like long Catholics too frequently view conversion as how people outside of our faith tradition become Catholic. However, that definition is really limited, and frankly a bit arrogant. Conversion isn't just for non-Catholics, catechumens, or candidates coming into our Church. The fact is that we all need to be converted. Not from one faith tradition to another, but from fear to faith, from wrongdoing to righteousness, and from selfishness to service. Conversion is ongoing journey that never ends. It starts and continues by doing our best to conform our lives to Jesus. In the words of St. Paul, I must become less, and Christ must become more!

John's conversion narrative of the Samaritan Woman is complex, rich in symbolism, and has layers of meaning. No single homily can do it justice. Life giving water is central to the first part of the story, with life giving food in the second. That's significant because water and food point toward Baptism and Eucharist. So this conversion story is also a sacramental story. That's one reason it's relevant for catechumens as they prepare to receive the sacraments of initiation. And we do well to remember sacraments are – close encounters with Jesus. The Samaritan woman in our story is obviously world-weary. A cynical philosopher once quipped - life is nasty, brutish, and short. Take away love, take away joy, take away hope and life truly becomes world-weary. It's a dark way to live, but many of us are prone to it. So what does a nasty brutish and short life look like? I think it looks much like a woman described in the song "Falling For Me" by the folk duo Johnnyswim. It's a song about someone so filled with self-loathing she can't fathom being loved. When someone tries, she pushes back saying:

Some may say you're mad to chase a heart locked away. I'm it's own soul-less enemy! There ain't no thing in this world that you'd like to be, less, than a wounded soul like me. That's what you'll get falling for me! Get out of my heart. Get out of my mind. Get out of my dreams. Get out of my sight. You might've known doubt. You might've known fear. You might've known love! But you never knew me! No you never knew me. You might've known love. But you don't know me.

A despairing soul is a wounded soul. A soul so wrapped in pain that the joy of living is extinguished. A soul that continually berates itself -- I'm nobody! I'm nothing! Get out of my life. At the same time it constantly laments - - You never knew me. No you never knew me. You might've known love. But you don't know me! And even if those words are never spoken out loud, they can be acted out. Wounded-souls withdraw! They isolate. They work at being alone. Better to be alone, heart locked away, than risk being hurt. And that brings us to the woman at the well. She seems to be a wounded soul. The first clue is that she's at the well, alone, at mid-day! And that's odd. Water gathering in the ancient near east was a social event. Women didn't go to the well alone. They gathered together, morning and evening, walked to the well, drew water, and returned home together. Only outcasts were at the well alone in the heat of the day. That way they avoided seeing others, and others avoided seeing them. As the story unfolds, reasons for her loneliness begin to emerge. She seems to have a checkered past. So there she is, alone at the well, when Jesus shows up. It's doubtful that the encounter with Jesus is accidental. Jesus has a knack for finding wounded souls. Jesus came to give life, and to give it abundantly. Maybe that's why Jesus breaks so many taboos in dealing with this woman.

To our modern sensibilities, there's nothing wrong with Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman or asking her for water. That's because we don't understand first century Jewish religious and social conventions. Even if we don't, the woman at the well does. This wounded woman would have been absolutely baffled by Jesus' behavior. First, Jesus was a Jew, and Jews didn't talk to Samaritans. Ever. Period. To make matters worse, this Samaritan was a woman. No observant Jewish man would presume to initiate a conversation with a woman when they were alone. Strange behavior indeed, and the woman knew it! She even says to Jesus: "How can you a Jew ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink – For Jew share nothing in common with Samaritans! Then the conversation gets really interesting. It quickly moves from well water, to living water, to eternal life. Until

the woman finally says – Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty. And that’s the beginning of faith in Jesus! It’s also the beginning of a chain of events that the woman could not possibly have foreseen.

The Gospel is silent on how long this woman had been coming to the well. But it was probably a good long while. She went through five husbands, and was now in a sixth irregular relationship. We don’t know how long she was shunned, but it surely didn’t start recently. Given the circumstances, chances are good she was heavily burdened by loneliness and conscience. And that’s a burden we can all relate to. Recalling those Johnnyswim lyrics, you can almost hear her singing to herself -- *“There ain’t no thing in this world that you’d like to be, less, than a wounded soul like me. That’s what you’ll get falling for me! You might’ve known doubt. You might’ve known fear. You might’ve known love! But you never knew me! No you never knew me. You might’ve known love. But you never knew me! But you don’t know me.* But the unexpected encounter with Jesus changes everything. Jesus knew her wounds. Jesus knew her doubts. Jesus knew her fears. Jesus knew everything she had ever done. Jesus did know her – and even so he offers her the gift of living water. And she accepts. And with that acceptance, her understanding of Jesus takes on new meaning. At first, Jesus was just another Jew. A different kind of Jew to be sure! Never before had she met a Jew who would talk to her, let alone take water from a cup she had touched. Next, Jesus tells the woman about her past, and she begins to see Jesus as a prophet. Then the light goes on. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. She’s so excited by her encounter with Jesus, she returns home and won’t stop talking about Jesus for two full days. Until finally, the other Samaritans also see that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, the savior of the world!

That’s pretty much where the story ends, but it’s also a new beginning. Through Jesus, the woman found a new freedom and a new happiness. How could she not? Jesus not only knows her, he knows her better than she knows herself. And through Jesus, she passes on what she has learned to others. The evangelized becomes the evangelizer, and she’s no longer alone. And so the story ends! But it not’s really over! The story of the woman at the well is also our story! In some way, at some time, all of us have been wounded by life. In some way at some time, we’ve all fallen into despair. And when we do, we withdraw! We isolate, and we’re afraid that nobody knows who we are in the depths of our wounds. But if the conversion of the woman at the well teaches us anything it’s this. No matter how wounded we may be, Jesus knows everything there is to know about us. He knows how burdened we are. So he dabs us with mercy, and offers us living water and the bread of life. And as time passes, we grow in understanding of just who Jesus is, and who we are to Jesus. Jesus came to give us life and to give it abundantly. So reach out your hand! To the font! To the Eucharist! And to each other! When we do we’re never alone. We’ve found a new freedom and a new happiness. We’re on our way to conversion.