

THE GOSPEL FOR LOSERS
John 4:5-10; 15-30; 41-42
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Being called a loser long enough and you soon begin to think, maybe it's true. Sooner or later even a great athlete ends up being on the losing team but he can still keep his self respect; but the poor soul who's consistently branded as a loser soon starts acting like one.

You remember kids like that from your middle school days who sat alone in the cafeteria, were always the last ones picked in gym class and the only time they were ever noticed was when they said or did something unintentionally embarrassing.

Of course, that's the trigger for the "Lord of the Flies" syndrome to kick in, when kids separate themselves into distinct groups, with the "Popular Kids" at the top of the pecking order and the "Losers" down at the bottom.

In my conversations with the juvenile offenders in the Baltimore County Detention Center I find most of them were told too many times, "You're a loser, you'll never amount to anything," not just from their peers, but their parents, and other adult authority figures. You can now understand how that insidious message can poison a boy's self image, causing the kid to convince himself his only option is to run the streets, get high on drugs and break the law.

Of course most people with the loser image don't end up in jail. Yet even children who grow up to have successful careers and have nice families, may still secretly dread looking themselves in the mirror.

Today's gospel reading tells a story about Jesus and how his encounter with an obviously dysfunctional Samaritan woman helped her experience, maybe for the first time, a sense of self-worth and self-love. It's a powerful story because it's really the story about us, you and me, encountering Jesus.

While passing through Samaria Jesus met a woman he immediately perceived to be both a loser and an outcast.

But before I go on with the story, some context and background. First, the story's location; second, the place of women in Middle Eastern society; and third this woman's self identity and place in her village's pecking order. Knowing these things gives power to the story's punch line.

First the location: Samaria. It's important to know the Jews looked down on Samaritans, who were the descendants of the Jews who lived in the Kingdom of Israel, which broke away from the House of David almost one thousand years earlier. When Israel, also called the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians, the Israelites intermarried with non Jews but still practiced some form of the Jewish faith. However, even though

they shared the same religion, full blooded Jews saw the Samaritans as half breeds and held them in contempt.

Second, the place of women in Jesus' time: legally and culturally women were second class citizens. There was a popular saying back then, especially among the Pharisees, "Lord, I thank you that I'm not a dog, a Samaritan, or a woman." Enuf said.

Which brings us to the third thing we need to consider before retelling this story: this Samaritan woman's self image, especially when she was in the company of a full blooded Jewish male. I imagine for her it was very intimidating.

Now we can go on with the story. Jesus, in Judea, decided to take a short cut through Samaria to get back home to Galilee, not something a practicing Jew would normally consider because Jews were taught even casual contact with a Samaritan would make them ritually unclean.

When they came to a well outside of a village, Jesus sent his disciples ahead to buy some food. Before long the Samaritan woman came to the well and to her surprise Jesus talked to her. She wasn't a prostitute, but she had a reputation as a five time loser as far as marriage was concerned. To escape taunts and insults she'd fetch her water at the noon hour, the hottest time of day, when no one else would be there.

It's possible if she were alive today she'd be a returning guest star on Jerry Springer with the theme "Why Can't I Keep My Man?" or "He Cheats On Me, But I Still Love Him!" and before we could change the channel we'd wince and think, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Hearing this, maybe it's easier for us to have compassion for this poor woman. She was an outcast among outcasts, an isolated, dysfunctional woman. There's no indication she was dishonest or despicable, but her life was a mess.

Shocked that Jesus would even acknowledge her presence she was equally astonished he spoke kindly to her. But Jesus must have really blown her away when he addressed her as "Woman," which in the original Greek was the same term of endearment meaning, "Special Lady" Jesus earlier used when talking to his mother Mary at the wedding feast in Cana.

So, maybe for the first time in a long time she was being treated as an equal in a two way conversation with a new friend.

The Jewish theologian Martin Buber wrote extensively on what he called the "I, thou" relationship. In authentic relationships, when we welcome each other as equals, that's when the Spirit of God has room to transform our relationships, first with Christ, then with each other, into friendships.

You already know this to be true. Think back to those standout "I, thou" friendships God led you into. Hopefully you can even recall times you reached out to

people who were living dysfunctionally and didn't know how to break free because no one ever told them how, until you came along.

Do you think that may be the primary mission of the Church, to befriend latter day Samaritans who are ignored and even distained by polite society?

I'm sure we've all heard the mantra, "The Church isn't a museum of saints, but a hospital for sinners," but have we fully put these words into practice? Sure, we all belong in Christ's hospital but shouldn't we be even more attentive to Jesus' generous brand of friendship and less inclined to our own?

Here's what I mean. Did you notice in the reading when his disciples returned to the well they "were astonished that Jesus was speaking with a woman?" There's no indication they even acknowledged her. In fact they completely ignored her.

Maybe after their initial astonishment they thought to themselves, "There goes Jesus, he's always befriending outcasts," but they didn't consider, "If Jesus is always befriending outcasts, maybe I should make friends with them too."

If the Church is to regain recognition and relevance in this new post Christian era, we need to pattern ourselves and our ministries after Jesus, by seeking out and then sharing in people's suffering and the suffering of Christ. Real Christianity goes beyond formal religion, it's meant to shock our senses so we can be liberated to be agents of grace by befriending and serving our neighbors, especially the so called losers who, through Christ, have the most to gain.

On this third Sunday of Lent why don't we make the decision to put ourselves out there for Christ and his Kingdom? Every day continue to read and pray the scriptures and then wait for God to speak to you as you offer up yourself as a living sacrifice, as a servant disciple whose growing love for Jesus compels you to have a growing love for lonely, desperate people who need to be loved by you. May all of us be blessed with that sacred burden?

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.