

The Gospels are full of unnamed people who have contributed to our understanding of the teachings of Jesus. The Samaritan woman we hear about today is one of these great unnamed teachers. She teaches us about courage, human dignity, and the conversion that we experience throughout our lives.

She shows us courage by overcoming the many obstacles that should have prevented her from speaking to Jesus in the first place.

In her culture women did not speak to men in public, not even their husbands. There must have been something about Jesus that moved her to speak to Him.

Then there was the fact that she was a Samaritan.

About a thousand years before Christ the northern tribes of Israel separated from the southern tribes and formed their own kingdom. A few hundred years after that the northern kingdom was invaded by Assyria and its inhabitants exiled. When the exiles returned to their land they re-established their ancient faith and built a temple on Mount Gerizim. This was the foundation of Samaria. They claimed to have the true religion of the ancient Israelites which was preserved by those who stayed in the land and avoided the exile. The Jews to the south rejected this claim and felt the Samaritans were corrupted by their assimilation into foreign cultures.

So the antagonism between Jews and Samaritans was similar to that between the Catholic Church and some of our Christian communities.

After Assyria, Samaria was controlled by many different empires, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans, five in all by the time of Christ. So when Jesus says the woman has had five husbands, the early audience for this Gospel would have understood that He referred not only to the woman but all of Samaria. She had the courage to move past these cultural prejudices.

Then there was the social stigma that came from having five husbands. Men had the authority to divorce their wives. This woman had been rejected five times. It is easy to understand why she would have wanted to avoid contact with anyone. Perhaps that's why she was at the well in the middle of the day instead of the early morning or evening when it was cooler. Perhaps she was avoiding side-long looks, whispering, and finger pointing from other women.

All of these barriers, all of these obstacles, should have prevented her from even approaching Jesus. But by doing so, she teaches us courage.

No matter how devout we are, how well read, or how knowledgeable we are about the faith, Jesus remains something of a stranger to us. It takes courage to overcome the obstacles in our lives and respond to His call. Those obstacles are many and different for each of us. Perhaps, like the Samaritan woman, we have been labeled by others and feel unworthy to approach Christ. She teaches us that we do not need to be afraid, we do not need to hold back.

Christ used the human need for water to reach out to the Samaritan woman. What need in our lives is He using to alter our point of view and establish the same kind of relationship with us?

The woman at the well teaches us about human dignity. One of the fundamental principles of Catholic Social Justice is that every person, regardless of creed, color, or circumstance shares in the dignity of God.

When Christ saw her, He saw her nobility, not the incidental aspects of her life. He saw someone who shared in His own nature both human and divine. Through the sanctifying grace we receive at Baptism, we share in the divine life of Christ.

I recently read about an Orthodox priest who will baptize a child, and then bow to the child, in recognition of the spark of divinity that has been imparted to it.

We need to do a better job at respecting this aspect of human dignity. I think there are situations where we can do better than we have been.

A few years ago, a teacher was fired from a Catholic school for becoming pregnant outside of marriage. This involved a violation of her contract with the school and so the school had every right, perhaps even an obligation, to let her go. That seemed to be the end of it but I think more could have been done to show our respect for someone who, like the Samaritan woman, and like each one of us, was created in the image and likeness of God.

To begin with we could acknowledge and applaud the courage the teacher showed in choosing life over death. Perhaps the school could have eased the difficult times that were in store for her. Perhaps her medical coverage could have been extended through the term of her pregnancy. Perhaps the school or the diocese could have helped her find employment elsewhere. Every week we are confronted with an opportunity to show the world what it means to love each other as Jesus loves us. And we often fall short of that standard.

The Samaritan woman also teaches us about our own lifelong conversion. Every spiritual journey follows the same pattern we see in today's Gospel. We hear the call of Christ. We find the courage to answer it. We begin to realize our own dignity, and we respond with prayer, either with or without words. When we finally encounter Christ, that is not the end of the story, it is just the beginning. That encounter changes us, transforms us, and we are sent back to share our experience with our brothers and sisters.

The Samaritan woman begins by talking about water, wells, and cisterns. Then the conversation moves to an area of her life that she thought was hidden. Jesus shows that He understands her but does not reject her. Suddenly the woman understands, you are the Christ, you are the Messiah. She is transformed and runs to share the experience of her encounter with others. She has even forgotten her water jar, the reason she came to the well in the first place. She will never be the same, neither will her community.

When Christ speaks to us in the deepest most hidden part of our lives we are never the same again. And neither is our community. When we encounter Christ those things that divide us, the arguments and animosity we may bear toward each other, seem unimportant. When we encounter Christ we are transformed and then are sent back to transform others.

Every journey to Christ follows in some way the path this woman took. The journey to Christ is an journey inward, a descent deep within ourselves. With the help of Christ, we overcome the obstacles that keep us from knowing Him. And then, when we have found God, we find a new life as a new person.

A genuine encounter with Christ always results in our returning to our community a changed person, ready to be a transforming agent ourselves.

That, in essence, is the Catholic approach to social justice.

We are transformed by an ever deepening relationship with Christ. That transformation allows us to see the dignity of each person, including our own. When we are more fully conscious of our own value discovered in Christ, we are drawn to change those conditions that diminish the value of others. We need to take care of each other, we need to go above and beyond what we are merely obligated to do, and live as we were created to live, a community of love created in the likeness of the Holy Trinity.

Courage, human dignity, and conversion, these are the lessons we learn from the woman at the well. These are the lessons that lead to a relationship with Christ.

So let us remember her in our prayers, let us thank her for her courage and example, and ask her to pray for us as well.

When we come together here, in this place, we join with her, with all holy men and women, and with all the saints and the angels, in thanking God for showing His love for us through the actions of our friends, our family, our loved ones, and our community.

Tertullian, a Christian writer from the 3rd century, observed that the pagans hate each other and are ready to kill each other, but the Christians, he said, “see how they love one another, and how ready they are, to die for each other.”

Think of those circumstances in your life that cause you to bear animosity, hatred or anger towards another person. Are you prepared to let that go in order to be closer to Christ? Can you forgive as Christ forgives and love as He loves? Who are you willing to die for?