

The Scandal of the Gospel

We've all heard the story of the "Woman at the Well" many times before – in fact, this is the seventh year in a row that we've proclaimed it in our Parish on the Third Sunday of Lent, as it is recommended that it be used especially when we have folks preparing for Baptism and Full-Communion at the Easter Vigil.

I think this story has an especially powerful message for us this Lenten weekend in our Parish as we formally dedicate our newly renovated Bishop Harrison Center...

What Jesus did at that well was absolutely scandalous – shocking – upsetting, *if* we look through the religious and cultural lenses of the day.

Here stands this woman at the well, at the hottest part of the day. Why? Because of her life experiences: five different husbands (wow!), living with somebody she wasn't married to.... She didn't feel at all welcome to join the other women who gathered at the well in the coolness of the early morning.

This woman at the well that day, felt ostracized, marginalized, excluded, used, abused and broken.

Then: *Jesus speaks to her*... turning the laws and customs of the day upside-down:

- men were not even allowed talk to *their own wives and daughters* in public...;
- no respected Jew would lower themselves to talk to any Samaritan, who they considered inferior foreigners,...
- ...let alone speak to a public sinner!

When the Disciples returned from town and saw what was happening even they were shocked and confused and scandalized!

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On February 15, Pope Francis gave a Sunday Homily to the 20 new Cardinals who had received the Red Hat the day before in St. Peter's Basilica. Reflecting on the Gospel story of Jesus' healing the man with leprosy in the Homily, he reflected on three key concepts of Jesus' ministry that are essential to the Church's ministry today, and – I would say – essential to our mission here at All Saints. These three concepts are present in today's "Woman at the Well" story.

#1) Jesus was drawn by compassion to the marginalized. Although he came to save and heal every person without exception, he was drawn – like a magnet – to those who were outcast, lost, broken, excluded, rejected, sick, poor, powerless, etc.:

- ❖ the woman at the well
- ❖ the leper
- ❖ the woman with a hemorrhage
- ❖ the prodigal son
- ❖ the woman caught in adultery
- ❖ Zaccheus the tax collector
- ❖ The lost sheep
- ❖ and the list goes on...

Jesus had what we call today a “fundamental option” – a special spot in his heart – for those on the margins.

#2) Jesus’ compassion led to action: Jesus listened and talk to the woman, Jesus touched the heart of this broken, hurting, marginalized woman and healed her broken-heart... and set her free!

Jesus was *moved by compassion to action*. Compassion moved him to draw near to every person in pain. Jesus did not hold back, instead he gets involved in people’s pain and their needs; Jesus has a heart unashamed to show compassion.

#3) Pope Francis points out that key in Jesus’ ministry is that he had a burning desire to *reinstate* the marginalized, to restore them to the community; to ensure that they are welcomed home and included.

The woman at the well *ran back to her community* filled with fire and hope and confidence and declared: “Come and see this Jesus who did this for me!” She was restored!

In his Homily to the Cardinals, Pope Francis says:

“Jesus wants to heal the leper. He wanted to touch him and restore him to the community without being hemmed in by prejudice, conformity to the prevailing mindset.... Jesus revolutionizes and upsets that fearful narrow and prejudicial mentality.... Jesus responds immediately... without waiting to study the situation and all its possible consequences....

“For Jesus what matters above all is reaching out to save those far off – healing the wounds of the sick, restoring everyone to God’s family... and this is scandalous to some people”!

Wow! Just listen to these words... Pope Francis goes on:

“Jesus is not afraid of this kind of scandal. He does not think of the closed-minded who are scandalized even by a work of healing, scandalized before any kind of openness, by any action outside of the mental and spiritual boxes, by any caress or sign of tenderness which does not fit into their usual thinking and their ritual purity. He wanted to reinstate the outcast, to save those outside the camp.”

Powerful words!

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So I guess, brothers and sisters, the Pope is telling us here at All Saints we're just going to have to keep being scandalous, if we're going to be faithful to the Gospel!

[Just as a side note: As most of you would know, several weeks ago I had my meeting with Bishop Cunningham to talk about my reappointment as pastor for a second term. In the course of what was a very cordial conversation, the Bishop said: “Fred, I want to share that I receive numbers of letters and emails about those workshops and speakers you have over at All Saints, from people reporting how scandalous it is that such topics are being addressed.” (Topics like our ‘Gay and Catholic Series,’ our ‘Transgender Workshop,’ our presentations and discussions on Conscience and Religious Liberty.) I responded: “Yes Bishop, and you would not believe the wonderful, powerful healing that occurs each time we invite folks to these events; and how wonderful it is now that we have our Pope Francis speaking out in our support!” ...!!]

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My sisters and brothers, these three concepts of Jesus’ ministry: being called to reach out with compassion to the marginalized, to those who feel unwelcome, those hurt by the Church and society with healing love and invite them to become part of our Community is key to the Gospel, and key to what our Parish is all about. When the community made the decision to purchase and renovate the Bishop Harrison Center, from the Diocese – which was no easy decision and required spending a significant amount of our savings and investments inherited because of the deep generosity of our former Our Lady of Solace and St. Therese Communities – it was with the dream that the building would become a ministry center for the greater community... Yes, number one a place for us to use for the faith formation of our community: studying, reflecting and praying together about Jesus and his mission – from our young children to our adults; a center where we can gather to break bread together – eat and drink and celebrate and socialize as a Community.

And, also a Center to be used for our mission and outreach – a community center – where all are welcome; especially programming opening our doors of welcome to those who are hurting... a Center that is a sign of hope ... salt ... and light on Syracuse’s greater southeast side... ...!

And: Brothers and Sisters, it's already happening:

- already the Spiritual Renewal Center has located in the building with its ecumenical mission, where persons of all faiths come to enrich their spirituality;
- The Friends of Dorothy Ministry – a hospice and advocacy Ministry for folks with HIV and AIDS – has already held the first of their monthly spaghetti dinner fund-raisers; which was a resounding success, once again celebrating the community of folks committed to social justice from throughout the Syracuse area;
- and, beginning next week the bakers of Brady Bread, the sale of which supports the Jail Ministry component of the Brady Faith Center, will begin baking their bread in our new kitchen.

Because of your amazing generosity, renovations here in Church and in the Bishop Harrison Center are being completed and plans are being finalized, with work to begin in the Spring, on the installation of an elevator, so that that the Center will be accessible to all our sisters and brothers!

One final thought:

As you know, in preparation for the Synod on the Family in October, Pope Francis asked for the input of the whole Church. Realizing that the survey from the Vatican was not exactly “user-friendly,” with the recommendation of our Pastoral Council, we created a simpler version focusing on those questions that pertained especially to persons who feel unwelcome in the Church: the separated and divorced; the LGBT community; women, etc. Realizing, too, that these folks were not likely to learn about the survey from the Diocesan website, the Catholic Sun, or a Parish bulletin, we advertised our survey in the local press: The Syracuse New Times, The Daily Orange; newspapers in the Oswego, Utica, Rome and Binghamton areas. 812 responses were returned (in less than two weeks!) and, were delivered to the Chancery Monday morning – meeting the Diocesan deadline for input; with the information ultimately going to the Vatican and Pope Francis!

Sisters and brothers, in reading over the survey responses, as part of my Lenten Reflections, it is amazing to see how our Church continues to hurt people – to push them away and make them feel unwelcome.... that's the real scandal!!! What continues to strike me is: what a loss for the Church... and, ... what an opportunity for healing... as was the woman at the well, who became a Disciple of Jesus!

Brothers and sisters: our Mission here at All Saints, when all is said and done, is to do what Jesus did with the woman at the well and throughout his ministry: with healing love and compassion we're to let all people know they have a home here at All Saints!

To the extent that we are faithful to this Mission, our Parish will continue to grow and become the Faith Community Jesus calls us to be... but not without creating some scandal!

Amen!