

Jn 4:5-30, 39-42
 27 March 2011
 3rd Sunday in Lent

“The Nonconformist”

The image on our worship bulletin is of a painting done in 2003 by Clifford Davis, who is an art professor at Rivier College; it's a Roman Catholic college in New Hampshire. The painting is called *The Conformist*. A few years ago, Banu and I were doing a workshop on images of Jesus. This was one of them.

The first time I ever saw it, I found it to be disturbing. In fact, it still seems kind of creepy to me. I'm not entirely sure why. Jesus dressed like the people of his era. If he had been born in late twentieth century America, he might very well appear this way. (That is, if he were on his way to a stockholders meeting or appearing at a campaign rally.)

I like to imagine that Jesus—and I believe that there's ample evidence in the New Testament to support this notion—lived as a **nonconformist**. We can see in the scriptures plenty of places where he goes against the status quo. (A perfect example is today's reading in John 4. I will elaborate.) He goes against the grain. He is a rebel: in some ways, even a revolutionary.

I'm going out on a limb here; I'm assuming that you are in **any** way like me. The problem is that we too often want Jesus to be **our** kind of rebel. I'm speaking for myself here, but I don't think I'm alone. He's supposed to be against the things that **we're** against! You know what I mean: “If I were king (or queen) of the world, there would be no more (fill in the blank).”

Getting back to our bulletin cover, I know one reason why I find it disturbing is that I find it disturbing that Jesus **would be** a conformist! There's just too much wrong stuff going on for him to say, “That's cool. I can live with it.” For me, that immediately brings up the question: do his disciples see wrong stuff going on in the world? Do **we** see what's going on in the world?

How about we take a look?

There's a lot of historical and cultural stuff going on behind Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. The ill-feeling of the Jews toward the Samaritans had evolved over a long period of time. More than a century before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, Samaria itself had been invaded by foreigners. There was considerable ethnic mixing. After the return from exile, the Jews considered the Samaritans to be mongrels.

We're told, “People like Ezra and Nehemiah blamed those men of Israel who had married foreign women, and they demanded that all such men immediately divorce their wives, passing along the experiences of humiliation, abandonment, and exile. Many of the men, especially in Samaria, refused.”¹ Therefore, according to Nehemiah, “I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair... Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign” (Ne 13:25, 30).

The cycle of dishonoring and disrespecting continues from the exile down to the lifetime of Jesus. The terrible train of blaming and shaming, which I believe we're all too

¹ www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/02/third_sunday_in.html

familiar with, runs right to a well under the midday sun near a Samaritan village. It is there where two people from very different worlds come together, and we'll see if the cycle continues.

In reality, Jesus shouldn't even **be able** to approach this nameless Samaritan woman. This is a meeting that should not be happening. I already mentioned the antagonism between their two peoples; Jews are not supposed to associate with Samaritans (or with other Gentiles, for that matter).

But there's also a blunt reality in their culture. Men and women who are not related have no business talking to each other. That's especially true for men and women who are strangers—unless they're planning to conduct the world's oldest business.

(On a side note, that's still true in some parts of the world today. Men still banish women from public view. I don't want to be culturally insensitive, but I would be embarrassed to admit that I had so little self-control that my attitude was, "Keep the women inside! I can't restrain myself. They shouldn't be out in public!")

In verse 7, Jesus asks her for a drink. And do you notice that his disciples, quite conveniently, are nowhere in sight? Understandably, she is suspicious of him. So we're back to something I spoke of earlier: will Jesus conform? Will he play the role that men are supposed to play?

Now, we have two reasons why this meeting should not be happening: the Jewish-Samaritan and the male-female thing. But there's also something else. Like it or not, carrying water is women's work. So where are the other women? Why is this woman all by herself in the heat of the day? Typically, water would be drawn in the cool of the morning or the evening.

In verse 16, we get some more insight into this anonymous woman. Jesus directs her to summon her husband. When she replies that she doesn't have a husband, Jesus says, "That's right; you don't have a husband. You've had five of them, and the one you're with now isn't your husband."

So here we are. This is the woman everyone whispers about. She is the subject of gossip. It's no wonder that she would rather go to the well in the heat of the day, rather than subject herself to the stinging remarks and glaring looks. The cycle of dishonoring and disrespecting, of blaming and shaming, has found a perfect storm in this poor woman.

Jesus is talking with a woman who has been divorced five times, and who knows what will happen with the guy she's currently with? Jesus is no fan of divorce, but not for the reasons that are typically offered. He doesn't like it because it is almost always unjust to the woman.

Deuteronomy 24 says that a husband may divorce his wife if "she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her" (v. 1). Something objectionable about her. The Good News Bible says "something about her that he doesn't like." That could be almost anything. It's noted, "To make a divorce effective, all the husband had to do was to call in a male witness, and write out the dismissal notice."²

Bruce Prewer, who is a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, notes, "A divorced woman, unless she had independent means, lost all status and value in the

² www.bruceprewer.com/DocA/22LENT3.htm

community. She was seen as a rejected woman. She was a disgrace. Her own family was loathe to receive her back in their household. Her very existence became precarious.”³

Jesus, as this woman is beginning to figure out, knows all about her. He understands the degradation that has been her life. He seems to realize how she has been made a scapegoat. Her husbands have treated her that way, and so have the people of the village.

As for the woman, her suspicion of Jesus appears to have shifted. It seems clear that he won't conform to the way men are supposed to deal with unfamiliar women. Instead, even though he knows how her life has unfolded, he doesn't project a spirit of condemning, but oddly, of compassion. I would guess that she's had plenty of the former, precious little of the latter. Given that, meeting someone whose interest seems to be genuine can be, in a way, unsettling.

It must have been unsettling! As we're told in verse 28, after Jesus' disciples return, she leaves her water jar and goes back to town!

Jesus doesn't play games with her; he doesn't come from a place of pretense. It's been observed, “To be brought to faith people must acknowledge where they stand, but they can take hope from this story inasmuch as Jesus persisted even though he knew the woman's state. He did not say to the woman, ‘Come back after you straighten out your life,’ for the grace that he offered was meant to help her change.”⁴

What is this grace? Let me attempt an answer by asking you, “What is the most valuable substance in the world?”

Here's a clue: it's the substance around which this whole story has been built. The woman has come for this. Jesus asks her for this. She wonders why he's asking her for this. As they go back and forth on the subject of water, Jesus reveals that he is the source of living water. Referring to the well that has brought them together, he says, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (vv. 13-14).

What is living water? Literally, it's running water; it's water that isn't stagnant. It's not water that has become a breeding ground for mosquitoes. In this story—and throughout the Bible—living water is the flowing of the Spirit. It's the water that quenches spiritual thirst. Isaiah 55 issues the invitation to “everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (v. 1).

Living water is the water of inner renewal. But this living water is a problem for us. That's because there's nothing we can do to deserve it. Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters? You that have no money? Really? That doesn't sound right at all! Do we really believe it when we pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”?

And what about this woman in the story? If Jesus were conforming to the standards of his culture, he would agree that she has three strikes against her! And maybe she does. That's what grace is all about.

³ www.bruceprewer.com/DocA/22LENT3.htm

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *A Retreat with John the Evangelist* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1998), 43.

On Fridays during Lent, we've been reading Terry Hershey's book *Sacred Necessities*. In his chapter titled "Amazement," he says this about grace: "however you slice it, grace is a tough sell in this culture. It doesn't package well for an infomercial. Which is, I suppose, precisely the point. Because there's no reason for this delivery, this package of grace. Moments without justification or merit are like stories without morals. They just flat-out go against our grain. You cannot balance the books here. You just have to sit and take it. And then let it wash over you, warm and serene and unmitigated."⁵ Undiminished.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman shows us what can happen when we remove our barriers and our posturing. The Samaritans actually **invite** him to stay with them. Think of how amazing that is! Far from simply tolerating his presence, which itself would be a step forward, they welcome him as their friend—and much more than that, as their Savior.

What cultural taboos keep us imprisoned? How have we conformed ourselves in ways that do not encourage life and love, but dishonor and disrespect?

Moments without justification or merit are those times and encounters in which we need not conform to the stuffy expectations that are imposed on us. The only conforming we need be concerned about is conforming to the image of Christ. We need not make some grand gesture, but rather, take faithful steps one at a time. That's how we acknowledge the truth of who we are and the possibility of who we can still become.

Those who know the Samaritan woman are sure that it's too late for her. And yet, she's the one who introduces them to the Messiah! So how can we think it's too late for any of us, even if we have conformed to all that was placed before us: by our family, our culture—even our church community.

Maybe that's why this story is a text for Lent. We have to repent, to turn, from our bland conformity, and conform to the ultimate nonconformist. We can then join with the people in verse 42 and say, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

⁵ Terry Hershey, *Sacred Necessities* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2005), 45.