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CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen. Please be seated.

In 1973, there was a psychological study that was done on 40 seminarians from Union Theological Seminary in New York City. And what the researchers did is they brought the seminarians one by one into a room, and they told them that they had to give a really important impromptu presentation to a large group of really important people on the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

And then they told them that they had to exit another door, go down some stairs, go through an alleyway and up into another building where the group was waiting. And while they were on their way through the alleyway, they placed an actor who would groan and roll on the floor and say, oh, I don't feel so well. And they wanted to see whether or not the seminarians would stop to see and help this person on the road, on their way to giving a lecture on the Good Samaritan.

So 40 of them went. How many do you think stopped and helped the person in the road? I hear one. Any other guesses? Zero? Sixteen. And they did a big study of the belief systems of these seminarians. They categorized them according to different things, whether or not they thought they were on a quest, or whether or not they were just simply obeying their own external sense of call when they became ordained, or whatever they were doing with their motivations. And they found that there was one consistent constant that caused people to walk by. For some of them, they said that they were in a hurry. The people who were told that they were in a hurry walked past the person lying on the street to give a lecture on the Good Samaritan.

Now, when I was told this in my class on business a few weeks ago, everybody in the room looked at me, and I had to fight getting a little defensive. And in my mind I thought, well, you know, why is this professor, first of all, quoting information from 1973 in a bizarre experiment? And why is this professor picking on seminarians when you have a lot of ethical lapses in the business community? Let's just say that.

And so I did what any person like me would do. I went and I read the original research. And I was hoping to send a little note to the professor saying you missed something, and he did. The original researchers noted that it wasn't simply callousness that meant that people could move past. It was because it

was based on being told they had to hurry. They actually were trying to help the person who made the request of them, and so they were in a conflict of priorities. And like so many of us, they chose what they thought was the greater priority.

And this did make me feel better about the experiment because I had something on the professor, but I still felt really convicted by this. Because I don't know about you, but I'm a bit of a rusher. I hurry. And to be told that my hurry can blind me to obvious things hidden in plain sight, well, that cut a little bit close.

Now in today's gospel we meet another Samaritan. And what's interesting about today's gospel that is fascinating to me is that there is no sense of hurry in this passage. This is the longest dialogue in the New Testament with Jesus. And Jesus is sitting by the well, it's about noon. His disciples have gone to buy food. This woman comes in to draw water about noon. And this is a bit unusual, biblical scholars have noted, because most often women would go in the morning to get water or maybe in the evening, but she comes at noon, and so they are alone and they have this conversation.

And today's gospel is also unique in that the priorities, the normal priorities, the ethical boundaries, the obligations are set aside. It was not customary for people of Jesus's time for a man to speak directly to a woman whom he was not linked to by marriage or blood or birth, or one kind of tie or another. Strange men did not speak to strange women in the public sphere. Didn't happen. And it wasn't the case, as the text is patient to tell us, that Jews and Samaritans mixed. They came from different places. So both of these priorities get pushed aside and turned inside out, and Jesus and this woman are having a conversation.

And one lesson that you and I could get from this incredible passage is that part of what we have to do in Lent is to maybe slow down a little bit, to maybe not be so hurried, and to maybe think about all those things that we tend to rationalize in our our world in order to get through our day, and we miss the suffering that is hidden in plain sight. But I want to suggest to you that there's something even deeper in this passage. Because if it's only about learning to slow down, or learning to somehow think through some of our rationalizations, then we are simply allowing ourselves to turn Lent into a kind of cosmetic procedure, when in fact it's meant to be a time of transformation.

Because there is something really important in this passage that we will miss at our peril, and that is the fact that it is full of grace. The only way the woman and Jesus can have this dialogue would be as an exercise in grace. And the only way that Jesus could have this banter with the woman in which it really is a bit of a rough dialogue at times in which truths are spoken plainly, is if they were engaged in that banter, which always has a bit of grace.

And the exchange of grace begins when the woman becomes curious and asks herself, who is this thirsty stranger? And she is invited into a life-changing conversation. Theologians and biblical scholars tell us that this woman, the Samaritan woman, is the first evangelist. Because unlike the disciples who simply come to Jesus, she's the first one who goes out and brings others to Jesus. Her life is changed by this encounter with Jesus, by this curiosity about Jesus. By this question she asks herself, who is this thirsty stranger?

And there's something else. In today's gospel that is critical for us to recognize, and that is that this passage echoes later on in the Gospel of John. Because this meeting with a woman happens at noon in chapter 4 of John and later in chapter 19, when Jesus is hanging on the Cross at noon, there is something else that Jesus says that ties it right together. Because when he is hanging on the Cross at noon, Jesus says, I thirst. And in chapter 4, we meet a thirsty Jesus. So the beginning of John and the end of John come together, which is why we read in the revelation reportedly written by John, that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega.

Something powerful is happening in this exchange with the woman that we miss at our peril. Because what we experience in today's gospel is not just the Jesus who is a thirsty stranger, but also the revelation of a thirsty God. God in Christ has come and said to us, I thirst. And St. Augustine believes that the only answer to that is to say that we have a God who is thirsty for us. A God, he writes, who is thirsty for souls. And the shaking thing about Christianity, the thing that makes me tremble the older I get is that we have revealed through Jesus Christ, a god who needs us, a god who loves us, a god who is thirsty for us.

And so the second question that today's gospel raises is what does it mean for us to worship a god who thirsts? We, of course, can define thirst in a number of ways. In today's gospel, there's always this play between physical thirst and spiritual thirst. And that's because the two go together, don't they? The thirst we have that is physical, it can drive you to destruction, it can make you go crazy. In our reading from Exodus, you have this moment in which the people of Israel are fed up because they're so thirsty on a physical level. And you and I know in the world we live in, that there are plenty of thirsty people on a physical level who are often given poisoned water to drink.

And you and I know that there is thirst that comes as a kind of craving. In social media these days, there's something called the thirst trap. It's when someone takes a picture of their assets in order to try to pull someone in and awaken in them the desire for them. It's become popular to describe any kind of desire as thirst. If you come on too strong, you're thirsty, and of course no one wants to be seen as thirsty.

What does it mean for God to come to us as a thirsty god? I think it means in part to have our eyes opened to that thirst we all have for peace and justice and reconciliation that only God can give. I believe that naming that thirst and seeing it in the context of grace and taking our time to ask ourselves, what does it mean to follow a thirsty god, and who is this thirsty stranger, Jesus? I believe that is the internal work of Lent as much as slowing down or maybe thinking through your priorities again.

And it is a dangerous thing to do because when we want something, when we desire something, when we're thirsty, that asks us to name a point of being powerless, and it may be unsettling to you that you may find in that thirsty God, no comfort for the discomforts that you face day in and day out. But Christianity lives and breathes with Jesus, who is a thirsty stranger in our midst. And Christianity lives and breathes with the revelation that God is thirsty for you.

Mary Oliver has a poem entitled Thirst. This is just a piece of it, but I want to give it to you as food for thought or maybe water for your thirsty souls.

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have…
Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent,
yet already I have given a great many things away,
expecting to be told to pack nothing,
except the prayers which, with this thirst,
I am slowly learning.

For Oliver, spiritual thirst for God is not quenched by God being present, but it only increases because thirst for God and God's thirst for us is a thirst for communion.

And in the photograph I have for you today, it's by Manuel Alvarez Bravo. And it is a fantastic photograph taken in 1934. Bravo was a self-taught photographer at the end of the 19th century, and is now recognized as being one of the most important photographers of the 20th century of early photography. And here you have a little boy perched on a cistern leaning over to drink water, which is coming down. And if you are looking at this photograph closely, you'll see the little dirty feet and dusty feet perched on this broken cistern.

And you are aware in a moment that this is a child who has had to learn to look after himself. And this is a child who needs love and is learning to love himself. And this is a child who is reaching out and taking care of himself, obeying a natural craving and need, but also awakening in the viewer the need, the thirst to care for all those thirsty children. Bravo calls this photograph Sed Publica, Public Thirst.

Lent is a time of naming that thirst. Lent is a time of thinking about thirst as it operates on a bodily, thirst as it operates on a justice level, on an interpersonal level, and thirst as it exists on a spiritual level. And through it all, these levels are reconciled today in today's gospel by the stranger who is thirsty, named Jesus. Dare to have a conversation with Him, dare to enter into that dialogue, dare to ask Him a question, and maybe in the process we'll discover that public thirst for God, which is God's thirst for us.

Amen.