

Homily – Small Talk at the Well

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Two weeks ago I was approached by someone who wanted to talk religion. I was wearing my priest collar in front of the St. Barnabas Thrift Shop, so perhaps I was fair game for a conversation with a stranger. This person wanted to tell me how awful the Christian God was since the Old Testament showed God ordering some pretty nasty stuff. God ordered the ancient Hebrews to slaughter their enemies including the killing of children. While this man was belligerent with me for the first couple of minutes, he seemed to calm down and even become intrigued by parts of our conversation about the Bible and about God. I wonder if our sidewalk conversation had any impact.

The Bible is a very complicated book or combination of books. It was written over more than a one thousand year time span under many circumstances and by many people, though we cling to the notion that all of the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit. There are many interpretations of the original languages of the Bible, Greek and Hebrew, and the Bible has been used to justify some things that have nothing to do with the love shown to us by Jesus. We can read the same words but understand those words differently.

Now, scholars say that there are four different levels or ways of reading the Bible and these four ways are the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and anagogical. First, is the literal or plain way of reading the Bible. This lower-level method focuses on the text as it is written and considers the text to be facts. This way of reading is done by Creationists who insist that the universe was created in six days and the world is only six thousand years old. Some contortions are needed by Creationists when the next chapter of Genesis after the first creation story has a totally different, second, creation story that has a very different sequence of events. The last book in the Bible, the Revelation of John is a very scary book if you only read it literally. Literal reading can be interesting but I don't advise staying there. Instead, use it as a jumping off point to the higher ways of reading Scripture.

The allegorical sense of Scripture is a method of biblical interpretation that uncovers deeper spiritual meanings beyond the literal text. Symbolic meaning is explored at this level, and there is often a connection between the symbolism in the Old Testament as it points to the revelation of Christ in the New Testament. In an allegorical reading historical facts are treated as signs of something else. For example, the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus is seen as an allegory for baptismal regeneration. Understanding symbols is key to reading the Revelation of John and seeing the beauty of Christ in that violent apocalyptic book.

Next is the Moral way of reading Scripture as we look at how each passage and story gives us lessons for living, guiding us on how to act justly in our own lives. In this way the biblical stories, characters, and events provide moral examples or warnings for our current situations. The goal is to move from simply hearing the Word to acting on it, fostering virtues like love, fairness and self-control. The parables of Jesus and many of the wisdom writings are guides to better living that we can still follow today.

Finally the anagogical or mystical sense interprets scripture in light of the afterlife, eternity, and humanity's ultimate destination. The Revelation of John is often interpreted in an anagogical way such that it points to the end of the universe. This causes some to watch for signs of the anti-Christ and other portents that the end is coming. I find this anagogical method to be the most troublesome for it causes some to try to bring to fruition the milestones that mean the end time will come sooner. I think it is scary that some see the War with Iran to be a necessary conflict that will hasten the second coming of Jesus. We must always remember war is never holy. Only peace is holy.

Now, I find it fascinating that the exact same Bible passage can be used in so many different ways. And, sometimes the uses are directly opposite. Let me use today's Gospel passage to illustrate what I mean.

In today's reading Jesus approaches a woman he does not know and asks or demands water from her. Then he both teaches and rebukes the woman, and finally rebuffs his Disciples when they are agog and aghast at his interaction with a stranger who was both a woman and outside the Jewish clan.

For hundreds if not thousands of years, today's Gospel reading has been used by Christians to justify the treatment of women as inferior. I think we all know that the Jewish, Roman and Greek societies of two thousand years ago were paternalistic, and Jesus' accommodation of this ancient social custom has been used to continue to make women second class. This Bible passage and others have been used to justify Christian behavior that pushes women down. This happens with a very literal readings of today's Gospel reading.

In addition, the woman was a Samaritan. As we often hear in sermon's about the parable of the Good Samaritan, these people were considered to be dirty, low, and outside proper Jewish society. One just did not associate with people like that, and Jesus' accommodation of this second ancient cultural norm has been used by Christians to justify the inferior treatment of outsiders. We don't need to treat all

with dignity and respect since we have examples of Jesus disrespecting the Samaritan woman at the well. Again, this is a very literal interpretation of today's story.

I have just shared one way that today's Gospel lesson has been used, but over the last hundred years, or so, the same passage of the woman at the well has begun to be used in the exact opposite way. Bible scholars have recognized that Jesus' behavior with the Samaritan woman is actually very radical for his day. Jesus models a level of dignity and respect for the woman that astounds his Disciples. He treats the woman as he would any of his disciples and again models a break with cultural norms. Thus this Bible passage can be used to lift up the status of women and outsiders. This is a moral way of interpreting scripture that helps us as we walk the pathways of life. When read correctly, Jesus' actions and teachings always lead to greater love as we shine the love of Christ out into the world.

Now, many of us have a sense of horror at the way the Bible has been used over the centuries to justify some pretty awful things, and we owe a debt of gratitude to Bible scholars and historians who have done a lot of heavy lifting to "take back the Bible".

There is a lot of diversity in God's creation, and some of that diversity is in the ways that God has created the variability we have in human beings. Age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, size, as well as physical and mental capacity are some of the beautiful diversity that God has created. In addition, we can layer in human-created diversity like national origin, language, education, and socio-economic status. And, I'm not sure if diversity like health, marital status or spiritual tradition is God-created or human-created, but these can be layered into the beautiful mix as well.

No matter where we each fall in this mix of human diversity, all of us can see ourselves mirrored in a beautiful way in the Bible. This is the way that scholars have "taken the Bible back" to its full glory and splendor. No matter who we are, each of us has parts of the Bible that lift us up and says "you are beautiful, and I love you."

It is wonderful that many of the Bible texts that have been used to clobber women and other minorities can be disarmed and used in a beautiful way. The exact same Bible passage can be used by both the enslaver and the liberator. Instead of pushing the stranger away, we can embrace the stranger as the beloved of God. Instead of pushing away the stranger on the sidewalk I was able to engage and talk about the Bible and about God so that that man felt seen, and heard, and engaged.

Not everyone has the gift of gab, but my dad certainly did, or at least he had the gift of gab with strangers. When I was growing up I don't know how many times we all ended up waiting for my dad as he found someone new, someone he had never met before, someone to chat with. A few weeks ago there was an article in the New York

Times by Jancee Dunn that talked about the big benefits of small talk. Like my dad, Jancee Dunn's dad found that a stranger in the elevator was merely a friend he hadn't met yet. And she wrote that small talk makes the world a better place.

Dunn shared information about an upcoming book by Gillian Sandstromm called "Once Upon a Stranger: The Science of How 'Small Talk' Can Add Up to a Big Life." Sandstromm has been studying the effects of talking to strangers for the last 16 years. She has found that small talk can increase your well-being, improve your social skills, reduce anxiety and social biases, and make you feel more connected. A self-described introvert and a formerly "incredibly shy person," Sandstromm said that plucking up the courage to talk to people she doesn't know had changed her life. By talking to strangers, Sandstromm has met a volunteer who administers first aid to bats as well as a sperm-bank manager. These sorts of chance exchanges, she said, add novelty, different perspectives, unexpected recommendations and learning opportunities into our lives, making them more "psychologically rich."

But how do we get better at small talk? Here is Sandstromm's answer. Choose a person who seems receptive. For instance, you might smile and see if it's returned. An easy shortcut to conversation is to look for someone who is displaying their interests: a band T-shirt, a museum tote bag, an antique brooch. Then simply ask about it. When you spot a person reading a book, wait for the reader to put the book down and then ask if it's good. Most people love to give recommendations. While there is no perfect way to start a conversation, a good formula is to ask a question, find something in common, or extend a kindness such as an offer to help. Follow your curiosity. Dr. Sandstromm's research suggests that people avoid talking to strangers because they assume the other person won't like them. But rejection doesn't occur as often as you might think, she said.

And you know someone who is really good at small talk with strangers? This morning we heard his story as he talked to the Samaritan woman at the well. The gospels show us that Jesus is really good at noticing people, engaging with people, and valuing people. And you don't have to be an extravert to follow the example of Jesus. We change people's lives with our small talk. Our own lives are changed for the better with our small talk. So embrace the moral interpretation of today's Bible reading and notice your own person at the well or in the checkout line, or waiting to cross the street. Even when we don't say his name, this small talk engagement is sharing the love of Jesus with the world.