

Year A, March 19, 2017
3 Lent
Christ Church, Mexia

O Lord our God, grant us the grace to desire thee with our whole heart; that so desiring thee we may seek to find thee, and so finding thee we may love thee, and loving thee may hate those sins from which thou hast redeemed us; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Where to begin? There is so much in the gospel reading this morning that it is very difficult to reduce it to a short homily. So let me follow along the lines of the prayer I just said and begin with a story from David Redding (*Jesus Makes Me Laugh with Him*). Have any of you ever had the pleasure of hearing David, or read any of his books? He is fantastic and I most heartily recommend him to you!

In David's words - "I remember going home from the Navy during World War II. Home was so far out in the country that when we went hunting, we had to go toward town. We had moved there for my father's health when I was thirteen. We raised cattle and horses. Some who were born on a farm regard the work and solitude as a chore, but coming from town as I did then, made that farm home an Eden to me.

I started a little flock of Shropshire sheep, the kind that are completely covered by wool except for a black nose and the tips of the legs. My father helped them have their twins at lambing time, and I could tell each one of the flock apart at a distance with no trouble. I had a beautiful ram. The poor man next door had a beautiful dog, and a small flock of sheep he wanted to improve with my ram. He asked me if he could borrow the ram; in return, he would let me have the choice of the litter from his prize dog. (As an aside, you do realize that dog is God spelled backwards. But that's another story. Continuing-)

That's how I got Teddy, a big black Scottish shepherd. Teddy was my dog, and he would do anything for me. He waited for me to come home from school. He slept beside me, and when I whistled, he ran to me, even if he were eating... And when I went away to war, I didn't know how to leave him. How do you explain to someone who loves you that you're leaving him and you won't be chasing woodchucks with him tomorrow like always?

So coming home that first moment from the Navy was something I can scarcely describe. The last bus stop was fourteen miles from the farm.

I got off there that night about eleven o'clock and walked the rest of the way home. It was two or three in the morning before I was within a half mile of the house. It was pitch dark, but I knew every step of the way. Suddenly, Teddy heard me and began his warning barking. Then I whistled only once. The barking stopped. There was a yelp of recognition, and I knew that a big black form was hurtling toward me in the darkness. Almost immediately he was there in my arms.

What comes home to me now is the eloquence with which that unforgettable memory speaks to me of my God. If my dog, without any explanation, would love me and take me back after all that time, wouldn't my God?" That is the good news of the gospel today, and I have to confess, it is the part on which I usually focus. But this is Lent and upon reflection, I want to reverse the perspective. Yes, God always accepts us, but do we always accept God? Therefore, my use of the opening prayer about desiring God...

The Samaritan woman, whom Jesus obviously accepts despite knowing her sordid history and despite the customs of the day that he violates completely, has difficulty understanding what he is saying. That happens a lot because Jesus speaks in heavenly terms, but we tend to listen or think in earthly terms. By the way, the term "living water" was also an earthly term in that time for what we refer to as "running water" today. It was water that moved, like in a stream or river, as opposed to a pond or well that was mostly stagnant. But, of course, Jesus isn't talking about water as we know it. He is talking about spirit.

The woman gets a little defensive at first when her lifestyle is exposed, so she does what we often do in similar situations – she changes the subject, and what better than to change it to religion and the differences between the Samaritans and the Jews. But she is open to the dialogue and that leads her eventually to the recognition of the fact that Jesus may be the Messiah. And she leaves her jar behind, perhaps symbolic of leaving her former life behind, and goes to tell the people of the village, from whom she has most likely been estranged and by whom she surely has been judged, about her experience and new understanding. Through her acceptance of Jesus, she has become evangelical. Her life has changed – and change is what happens when we truly accept God.

But just last week, Judy reminded us of another encounter. Nicodemus comes to see Jesus. From all indications Nicodemus is a righteous man, a good man, a very religious man who believes he

might be missing something though. But he can't grasp what Jesus is telling him; it is too different from what he knows or believes and he is caught perhaps in earthly interpretation – can a man return to his mother's womb, for example? So he leaves unchanged. Now it isn't that he doesn't accept God at all, he is a religious leader of the Jews, but he can't accept what God is trying to tell him at the moment. And this is most likely the problem that we may have; we come to church, we have a concept of God formed by various factors and experiences, but sometimes we are unable to modify that concept when confronted with new information so that we may know God in the way that God wants to be known by us at that time. So like Nicodemus then, we are unable to grow spiritually and to change.

As we proceed through this period of Lent, I hope that you will understand that God accepts us regardless of any faults, history, etc. Grace exists. We have no reason to worry there. And I hope that you will examine your acceptance of God to see if you fully understand who God is and what God desires of your life. How much do you love God? Then, regardless of any introversion or other impediments, I hope you will be able to show forth that love by your life and deeds, and by reaching out to those around you who can most benefit from your sharing.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.