

Sermon for 27 March 2011
3 Lent, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Recently I've been slowly "netflixing" my way through a Masterpiece Theater miniseries that came out recently called *Downton Abbey*. It's a period drama, taking place a couple of years before the First World War, and it follows the Lord and Lady of a rather large estate as they run the manor and attempt to get their daughters married off to the right kind of suitors (namely, those whose class is consummate with their own). The degree of discomfort of some in the family when they learn that the estate is to pass to a third cousin of the Lord, who is deemed of a lower station due to being the son of a doctor and an attorney himself, is fascinating. The Lord's mother, the countess dowager, seems scandalized when this third cousin explains that he had got a job in the village

rather than concerning himself with the affairs of the manor, and she's baffled when the young man says that he can take care of his lordly obligations on the weekends. She responds, quite sincerely to this proposal by asking "what's a weekend".

What always fascinates me about novels and films set in pre-war Britain is the complex view of class which can seem at first to be rather foreign to an American reader or viewer like myself. The obsession with maintaining what society deemed to be the proper relationships between members of different social strata (especially when the distinctions seem so very slight from our perspective) can be confusing. After all, not many of us would see a doctor or a lawyer as being a bit too "middle class" to marry one's daughter.

And yet, the basic human weakness which gives rise to the complex social rules one finds in a *Downton Abbey* or a Victorian or Edwardian novel is

still with us. We still have this tendency to separate "us" from "them", "our kind of people" from "those people". It may not be entirely, or even predominantly, a class issue anymore, but we've nonetheless retained the sinful inclination toward holding those who aren't "our kind of people" at arms length, whether they be undocumented workers or single mothers or the adherents of other religions which we've turned into frightening caricatures.

The upholding of social divisions as somehow divinely instituted was as great a temptation in Jesus' day as it was in pre-war England or 21st Century America. The woman at the well was not "our kind of people", and I think we can forget how radical Jesus' decision to even acknowledge her really was. For one thing she was of the wrong religion; Samaritans and Jews, while having much more in common than either would have acknowledged, had such different theologies that each claimed the

other's religion a heresy so profound as to preclude contact. This morning's Gospel puts it pretty plainly: "for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman mentions perhaps the most important difference, as far as they were concerned, namely that the Samaritans prayed to God on a different mountain than the Jews, who insisted that Mount Zion in Jerusalem was the proper place for worship. We might see this distinction as trivial today, but for Jews and Samaritans, it was of the greatest importance.

What's more, the Samaritan woman's lifestyle would have branded her a less than wholesome acquaintance. She had been married five times, and we can assume from her reluctance to share this information that she had not just been five times a widow. The man she was now with was not her husband, and suffice it to say that cohabitation was far

less commonplace or socially acceptable in the first century as it is today.

Perhaps this is why the Samaritan woman came to the well at noon. All of the other women would have drawn water in the morning, and one can imagine the taunting that a loose woman in a Samaritan village might receive from her fellows. She was likely unpleasantly surprised to see Jesus at the well that day, having hoped that she could get her water covertly, without facing once again the public's scorn.

And yet, thanks be to God that her attempt to hide was foiled by the Savior's presence. Thank God she was found, not only because it led to a whole village coming to faith in our Lord, but because it remains a powerful example to us today, who are just as likely as the Samaritan villagers to scorn those whom we don't understand, who are just as likely as the disciples to be astounded by one who

reaches out to those who aren't "our kind of people".

Jesus deemed one so unlike himself in background and social standing and general wholesomeness not only as a good person with whom to share a drink of water, but as an appropriate witness to his message of redemption, as a person adequate to the task of being a missionary. When we, like Jesus, can see this potential in those that make us uncomfortable, they'll cease to cause us discomfort. When we stop worrying so much about what our fellows think about the fact that we consort with marginal people, when instead we take the example of Christ, who broke bread with prostitutes and sinners and a Samaritan woman at a well, we might start to see that Christ's message of salvation is for everybody, and that Christian brotherhood is bigger than our own provincial attitudes about the caliber of person with whom we like to interact. Let us pray, then, to be open to

the people whom we don't yet hold in high regard,
knowing that God's judgment of a soul matters more
than ours. The seeds of God's grace can be found in
soil whose richness we do not at first discern, and
the living water which we carry might cause growth.
The most unlovely soul might need nothing more than
a glass of that water to quench his seemingly
undying thirst, and it is not our prerogative to
withhold it, because it's not ours to begin with.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Amen.