

Reflection for the Third Sunday of Lent

John 4. 5 - 42

March 18-19, 2017

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So, here's the good news about Lent...are you ready for this?

In spite of the fact that it's good to do penance...you can eat all the chocolate you want!

Some of you don't believe me, do you? There must be a hitch, right? You think I work for Cadbury's or the Canadian Dental Association, don't you?

But no...today let's reflect on how our religious practices change, how new insights can come to the church and allow our age-old traditions to come alive in new ways in today's world.

Traditionally, as a kid, my Lent was always about giving up chocolate and other snacks. Today, I think we should look at the beauty of our tradition, with a view to asking ourselves not just "what can I give up?", but as Father Richard invites us to do as we approach the altar, "what is it we no longer need to carry? What can we let go of?"

To do this, we have to be open to something new. Listen to that first reading; the people of God were so fed up, they were ready to stone their prophet, Moses. But a miracle occurred, and the lesson they learned was, "If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts; as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof..."

And what about today's Gospel reading, which really challenges us to think of God's message in a different way? John's gospel never even gives this Samaritan woman at the well a name. And yet, she was the one to whom Jesus first admitted that he was the Messiah. Do we think that that was just a mistake? This woman is quoted at length, challenging or even contradicting Jesus, and being in turn, challenged so very deeply, herself.

You know, the Scriptures really don't tell many stories about women, now, do they? You might have noticed that all the Evangelists were men, and so the Gospels are full of stories about how busy the guys were...fishing, but also doing the dishes, sweeping the floor of the house, cooking, changing the kids' diapers, you know...

Maybe we can listen and respond to the gospel in new ways...

For example, we learn that, among the Orthodox Churches of the East, it is said that the woman at the well, this woman who went on to evangelize her entire village, was baptized by the Apostles and given the beautiful name Photini, which means, "The Enlightened One."

In the Eastern traditions, Photini is revered as "the first to proclaim the gospel of Christ." Apparently, she converted her 5 sisters and 2 sons, all of whom became tireless evangelizers. Photini eventually left Samaria for Carthage, where she very successfully spread the good news. In Rome, it is said, she even converted the Emperor Nero's daughter, which so enraged Nero that he cruelly tortured and martyred Photini as well as her entire family. Because of all this, among the Greek Orthodox, Photini is referred to as a "Holy Martyr" and like Mary Magdalene, as "Equal to the Apostles."

This non-traditional reading of John's Gospel might help us all look at Lent with new eyes. This Lent, we're also invited to do something new, to **"Give It Up For The Earth!"**

In his encyclical letter on the environment, Pope Francis states that Catholics have an "urgent need" to reduce our fossil fuel use. So instead of giving up chocolate, consider doing something else... Take a peek at the cards in your pew...

This Lent I might drive less, or take the bus to church one Sunday. I might fast from eating meat one day (an age-old Catholic tradition, after all) as a way to reduce emissions from cattle-raising. I might turn off the lights when they're not being used, turn down the heat when we're sleeping, or look into supporting renewable energy through investing in Bullfrog Power or the Ottawa Renewable Energy Cooperative.

If we reflect deeply enough on what we're doing, these personal commitments can help create psychological changes in our relationship with creation, and prepare us for the deep social and economic changes that we urgently need to make in order to better respect God's creation.

Yet we know that personal greening, or even greening our church building, are inadequate responses to the huge challenges of climate change and ecological degradation. Again, Pope Francis tells us that "Reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage and responsibility, above all on the part of countries which are more powerful and pollute the most." (*Laudato Si*, #169)

That's why the card in your pew can be signed and left in the box at the back of the church, or placed in the mail. They will all be collected and presented to the federal government. **Give It Up for the Earth!** invites you to request that our leaders also take renewed and more robust steps to address climate change and help prepare our society and economy for a low-carbon future.

It's interesting to think back, if you're of a certain age, and reflect on how our Lenten observance has changed over time. 50 years ago, the Canadian Catholic church created Development and Peace. Now we mark "Solidarity Sunday" and take up a special collection on the 5th Sunday of Lent. We never did that when I was a kid, but I'm so glad that now, Lent just couldn't be Lent if we didn't educate, act and collect funds for projects of global solidarity.

I think Photini, the "Enlightened One," could teach us a few things about how to celebrate Lent in 2017. She'd surely let us know that we have to make a lot more space available to women leaders in our churches today. She'd definitely want us to know that the people who are going to be most drastically affected by climate change and ecological degradation are the poor women of the world. I'd venture a guess that she'd be fully-supportive of efforts to make Lent a time of ecological sensitivity, encouraging us to **Give It Up for the Earth!**

And I could be wrong, but maybe, just maybe, St. Photini was exactly that type of woman who would have really, really liked to eat chocolate...