

Sixth Sunday of Easter: As Good as the Christian Samaritans

They were the people that everyone hated. They were the Samaritans. The Romans and Greeks and other gentiles hated them because they saw them as just another group of Jews, only ones who could not benefit the empire much. The Jews hated them because they saw the Samaritans as half-breeds. The Jews believed that the Samaritans had polluted blood, part gentile and part Jew.

Back in the 8th century before Christ, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and brought thousands to exile in Assyria. Many of those who remained in the Northern Kingdom married pagans and worshiped both Yahweh and the pagan gods. These were the Samaritans. When two hundred years later the Jews of the Southern Kingdom returned to Jerusalem from the Babylon exile, the Samaritans offered to help them rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews refused their help telling them that their very presence in the Temple would desecrate it. The Samaritans hated the Jews for looking down on them, and the Jews hated the Samaritans for their history of accommodation with the pagans.

The Samaritans were also looking for the Messiah, but they knew that the Messiah would come through the Jews. What chance did they have of being brought into the New World Order the Messiah would establish? On the other side of the dispute, as difficult as the Jews had in accepting the concept that salvation would be available for the gentiles, the concept that salvation would be offered to the Samaritans was not even considered a remote possibility. The Samaritans were lower than low.

And then Philip arrived at the capital of Samaria. He spoke about the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Could it be that the Messiah of the Jews would also be a Messiah for the Samaritans? The Samaritans were open to faith in the Gospel. Through Philip they witnessed the signs of the Messiah being worked right there among them. Cripples walked. Demons came out of people. Everything that the prophets wrote about was taking place not just among the Jewish Christians, but right there among the Samaritans. They accepted Jesus with joy. They were no longer rejects, but one with the people of the New Way of Jesus Christ.

As happy as they were, the new Samaritan Christians were given an even greater gift than they could have ever expected. Peter and John had heard about Philip's work among them. The two great apostles went to Samaria. They prayed over them asked God to send the Holy Spirit upon them. They laid their hands on them and the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit the same way that the apostles received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. They were confirmed in their faith. This, in fact, is one of the earliest biblical references to the sacrament of confirmation. It was very clear to all the followers of Jesus, these Samaritans were equals in the faith, equals in the Body of Christ, equals in salvation.

Have you ever had feelings like those Samaritans must have had before Philip visited them with the Gospel? Have you ever felt that you were not good enough to

receive the gifts of the Lord? Have you ever looked at another person in the Church and wished you could be half as good as he or she is? Perhaps we have all felt that way at various times throughout our lives. This reading tells us that in the eyes of God we are good enough. He makes us good enough. He calls us to faith, and then showers us with the gifts of faith. The joy that the Samaritans had is our joy. We are loved by God. He gave us His very life. He gave us his very spirit, the Holy Spirit.

Many of us are still bogged down in the negative self images we suffered from during our adolescence or our teenage years. Some of these negative images are due to our not meeting our own unreal expectations. Perhaps we remember that day as an adolescent that we looked into the mirror and didn't see Miss American or Mr. Universe. Sadly, some of the negative attitudes of our lives have been forced on us by people whom we should respect but who have treated us with disrespect. Perhaps it has been conveyed to us that we are a disappointment to our parents, our teachers, our employers, or even, for those who are married, to their spouses or their children. This is really emotional abuse. In fact, in marriages emotional abuse always precedes physical abuse. "Nobody else would want you, at least you have me." (Side note: Young people, ladies as well as also young men, do not accept being treated with disrespect by your boyfriend or girlfriend no matter how good looking or popular he or she is. Dump the garbage.) Look, we know that we are human beings who often sin, but we cannot allow abusive thoughts to destroy us, whether those thoughts come from within us or from others. We are precious in the eyes of God. We are also precious in the eyes of all who truly proclaim God.

It is a mistake for me to compare myself with other priests. It is wrong for you to compare yourselves with other people at whatever stage of life you are in. It is a mistake for parents to compare themselves with other parents, for men to compare themselves with other men, for women to compare themselves with other women. It is a mistake for Teens and young adults to compare themselves with their companions, or classmates. It is wrong for any of us to compare ourselves with our brothers or sisters. We are individuals, not clones. It is wrong for any of us to think, as the Samaritans must have thought, that we are not as good as others. God loves each of us for whom we are, not for what we think we should be like. He loves us for whom He created us to be. We are created in the image and likeness of God; yet in the mystery of God's creation, each of us is a unique reflection of this image and likeness. He loves us for whom we are. We are not rejects. We are not half breeds, only part Christians. We are precious, precious in the eyes of God, and precious in the eyes of all those who really love the Lord.

And He gave us His Son. We possess Jesus Christ. In the Gospel reading Jesus says, "I am in the Father. You are in me, and I am in you." We are not orphans. We are not alone in the world. We are not rejects from the society that matters. For the society that matters is the Kingdom of God. Every other society has value only to the degree that it participates in the Kingdom of God. We belong to God. He belongs to us. "I am in the Father. You are in me, and I am in you."

The Samaritans embraced the New Way, embraced Jesus because He first embraced them through the teaching of Philip. This is the way of Grace. Grace always begins with God's gifts of love. It reaches its goal when we respond by loving God in return. We have received grace. God has showered us with His love. Now He calls us to give witness to the world that His love is real.

We can do this.

We can proclaim Jesus Christ with our lives.

We are good enough, plenty good enough.

We are sons and daughters of God.