

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, 2017  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

We were playing *hide and seek*.

Since my parents owned 8 ½ acres with woods, and trees and old buildings, there were lots of great places to hide.

So my brother and I, along with the neighbors, were playing hide and seek one summer day. I noticed that dad had leaned an old ladder against the wild cherry tree right in front of the chicken pen.

This tree had a thick trunk, and then wide branches went out in all kinds of directions.

So I climbed the ladder, and found a branch that went almost sideways. I realized I could lay flat on my back on that branch, looking up toward the sky.

I thought I had found what I was looking for – *the perfect place to hide*.

I could hear kids running and shouting below.

But I had forgotten about the game. Because, as I was looking up toward the sky, something unexpected was happening.

Sunlight was flickering through the breezy leaves. I felt a sense of peace wash over me. I almost felt suspended in mid-air, surrounded with love.

And I just started talking to God. I think I said to Him, “this is really cool,” which is a child’s way of saying “thank you.”

I told God what was on my mind. Mom broke her leg. My brother was mean to me. The prayers of a child.

No matter what I said to God, I just felt – love, and peace. I could tell that He was there.

I *had* been looking for somewhere to hide. I hadn’t gone up that tree looking for Jesus. But apparently Jesus was looking for me. And he *found* me.

If people ever ask me, “where did you start to fall in love with Jesus,” I tell them – “up there, in that tree, where he found me that day.”

I kept going back there. Even into my college years. If I needed to pray, I went up that tree. For me, it was ‘our special place,’ the point of contact, the place where the Lord started to woo me and draw me close to his heart.

I think many of us have a ‘point of contact’ with the Lord. A place, an experience, which helps us to know that we are not alone – that God is with us – that God is holding us up and leading us higher.

Where is that point of contact for you? Is it a place? Do *you* have a cherry tree? A favorite chair? The beach? Or the park where you walk?

Perhaps it’s a *thing*: the rosary your grandmother gave you; the blanket you wrap around yourself; the Crucifix from your father’s casket. A photo.

Maybe it’s the tabernacle in the Blessed Sacrament chapel. Or the song that was sung at so many family funerals.

Where is your point of contact, where Christ has been wooing your heart? Maybe it’s a *person*. The embrace which always consoles you, the hand you hold which always reassures you. The voice you hear that always inspires you.

What is your point of contact with the Lord? Perhaps, today, we can thank God for that gift.

The woman in today’s Gospel needed a point of contact too. Her life, like her water jug, is empty.

We don’t know her *whole* story, but we know it’s a *hard* story. She is a woman in a man’s world. She has been married five times, and as we would say in the South, now there is a 6<sup>th</sup> guy with whom she is “keepin’ company...”

Five husbands. Did some of them die? Did they divorce her? Did she leave them? We don’t know. But any woman in that circumstance in that culture would be looked upon with suspicion.

Plus, she is a Samaritan. John’s Gospel tells us that there is tension between Jewish people and Samaritans. They liked to dislike each other.

So this woman with the complex past, this woman who has a talent for “keepin’ company,”

comes to the well, *alone*.

Apparently, she did not go to the well looking for an encounter with the living God. She just wanted to fill her jar with water. Maybe she came in the heat of the day in order to hide from the rest of the village women, who came to the well at morning or evening.

*She wasn't looking for Jesus. But Jesus was looking for her.*

And if, in the future, anyone asked this Samaritan woman, "Where did you first fall in love with Jesus?" She could have told them "Right there. At that well. One minute, we were bantering back and forth about buckets and bubbling water, and then next thing I knew he was looking into my soul, telling me the truth, shining his light and lifting me higher. There. *That* well. *That's* where I fell in love."

This woman, with so many strikes against her, receives some of the most profound insights that Jesus ever gave to a human being. And remember – she did not go to the well looking for spiritual insights. She went to fill her bucket. But Jesus was there, to fill her heart, mind and soul.

Maybe she starts off thinking that this Galilean rabbi is just another tall drink of water, another man to be flirted with.

But soon she realizes that *he* found *her* for a reason. Her life did not have to remain empty or dry. She had been *found*, when she found her point of contact. At the well. In the person of Jesus.

And she just couldn't keep it a secret. She ran back to her village, and couldn't stop talking about how she had met a man, *at the well*, who had changed her life. (That's what happens when you fall in love. You can't stop talking about the one you love!)

So the villagers come with her, to her special place at the well.

And there, *they* meet him. And they understand: This rabbi named Jesus - he's the real deal.

I wonder how often she returned there? After all, Jesus kept moving. He went on to Jerusalem. He always seemed to be on the move.

Until they tried to pin him down. Actually, they pinned him *up*, on the cross, and then sealed him in a tomb. *That would fix him*. He wasn't going anywhere.

Except... even a tomb couldn't pin him down. And the Risen One just keeps moving, and keeps loving. He shows up in the most unlikely places... like cherry trees...

Even when we're not looking for him, he is looking for us. And he has this uncanny habit of showing up precisely when we are NOT looking for him! He surprises us, and sheds his light and love on us, and lifts us up.

Finally, consider this: that Risen One may want YOU to become the 'point of contact' for someone whose life is dry and empty.

Today, there are lots of folks who think that they have to hide for some reason. There are people who are frightened because their past is complex, their story isn't perfect. People still like to pass judgment and harrumph about imperfect morality.

How many folks are slinking around Richmond, carrying their emptiness to some *well*, *somewhere*, trying to hide from a hard world?

They may not think that they are looking for Jesus. But Jesus is looking for them. And YOU may be the point of contact, the peaceful place where life's harshness is changed for someone, because God works through you to love someone else, someone who is running on empty.

If you follow the Holy Spirit's promptings, YOU could become someone's cherry tree!

By the way – that old wild cherry tree blew over in a storm a few years ago.

But that's OK. Because I can always remember how Jesus found me there when I was trying to hide. I remember that it was on that branch that we started "keepin' company," and I fell in love with him.

And the Jesus who surprised me up a tree, the Jesus who surprised the woman at the well, keeps showing up in places we least expect – even in a plate full of unleavened bread and a cup full of wine.