

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

1757 Conway Street • St. Paul, Minnesota 55106 • phone 651.774.1585 • e-mail church@stpascals.org

03.08.15 Homily

From the way the bible tells the stories it would be easy to believe that the Jews and the Samaritans of Jesus' time had been ancient mortal enemies from forever ago. But in fact that wasn't the case at all. In fact both the Jews and the Samaritans were descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Both were rescued by Moses and Aaron after having been called out of slavery in Egypt. Both travelled together on the great Exodus through the desert. Both entered the Promised Land and both were ruled by kings Solomon, and David, and Saul. It was only much later in their histories that they split apart and eventually became such bitter rivals. And it was because both of them claimed to have hold of the true God of the bible; but they couldn't agree on where to worship that God. For the Samaritans it was on Mount Gerazim—the same place where Abraham had prayed. For the Jews it was Jerusalem, which was established as a city centuries later. So the long hostility between the two was truly a family feud that had been allowed to fester and harden into hatred over the generations. But only one side of the family ended up writing down the stories in the bible that we read today. That's why the Samaritans are presumed to be the bad guys. And it's the same reason why it was so shocking and scandalous when Jesus himself ignored all of the rules of his own religion when he was presented with the opportunity to shun people or exclude them from the chance to repent and to be reconciled. This encounter at the well in today's gospel wasn't simply a conversation between a Samaritan woman and a Jewish man. It was a reunion of long-lost cousins. And it's a meeting that could never have happened in the first place if Jesus hadn't defied the laws governing his travel restrictions. A good Jewish man wasn't supposed to be walking through Samaria to begin with; yet here they all were. Whatever other sins she may have had, this woman kept to where she belonged.

But Jesus remembered his family tree and his deepest ancestral roots, and he recognized that something was wrong with the practice of people showing contempt for one another on appeal to their alleged honoring of the very same God. Any so-called discipleship or worship that had the immediate and direct effect of alienating people from one another—even from members of the same family—is not something that is rooted in true faith. If Jesus and this woman had taken the time and trouble to do so, they may have eventually been able to map out just where they belonged on the family tree together, and who among their ancestors had been actual blood brothers and sisters.

And even after all these hundreds of years of separation, they may have been able to discover together just who and what constituted their "faith trees." I was recently introduced to the idea of a faith tree by a wise spiritual guide. We all have one, and we all belong to one. We wouldn't be here right now if it were otherwise. Yet a faith tree is perhaps something that we've not thought much about. Maybe never. A faith tree is somewhat like what we think of as a genealogy or a family tree, but it traces not bloodlines and DNA and cultural history. Instead it traces the lives through which someone has shared faith with another person, who has passed it along to another and another and another. Not a one of us is here now because of a direct voice from God Almighty in Heaven telling us to get to church. It's true that some of us may have experienced extraordinary signs and wonders and miracles to bolster our belief and our commitment, but even those things wouldn't have made and sense to us unless another person—or many of them—hadn't told us about the God in whom they believe and whom they serve. The God who has always been inviting people. Many times a faith tree may overlap quite a bit with a biological family tree—parents passing along the treasure to their children or grandchildren. But sometimes a faith tree has very little to do with our blood relatives. It's the tree through which the stories and expressions of compassion and love flow from one generation to the next, and sometimes across the same generation. It is always God who is the author of the gift of faith, but it's handed on through the tree.

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(Candidates and Catechumens). Someone first told the child Jesus about God His Father—we presume it was his parents and his religious community. Someone first taught him to notice the evidence of grace in his world. Someone first affirmed the wisdom that young Jesus learned and shared. Someone early on attracted Jesus' interest by the example of his/her holiness of life or perseverance in suffering or generosity of heart. Even Jesus had his own unique faith tree, through which he came to discover who He was and was meant to be.

And here's the important part: So too did that Samaritan woman who met up with him at the well. She wasn't simply an empty vessel or an ignorant alien. She too had been listening to stories of faith and God all her life. She too had a faith tree, inhabited by people who wished her also to discover the mystery and consolation of God. How do we know that? She tells us in the gospel today. "I know there is a messiah coming," she says, "and when he comes he will tell us everything." How does she know that? Where did that come from? "I know that we Samaritans worship God here on *this* mountain, while you Jews do it on some other one." Who told her all that and convinced her that it was important? "I know that Jewish men and Samaritan women aren't supposed to speak to one another. And I know that Jacob built this well for is and drank from it himself. And I know that I am to be watchful for the return of the Lord." Somebody among her faith tree passed on those things. One can only wonder who it was and why she still felt hopeful about being discovered and forgiven by the Lord in spite of her many sins. Somebody was a vital part of her faith tree. And somebody had led her to understand that the minute she might suspect that God was coming close to her people—even in such an unlikely circumstance—the most important response was to drop everything, run off and tell everybody she could find. Somebody did all that long before Jesus arrived at the well. What a gift. What a blessing.

So who's in your tree? For whom are you part of their tree? Thanks be to God.