

We're entering that period of Lent when the Gospels for today and the next two Sundays illustrate the heart of the Christian faith. These Gospels are so important that whenever a parish has catechumens who're to be baptized at the Easter Vigil, these "Year A" Readings must be proclaimed regardless of what liturgical year it is. Don't be sidetracked by the fact that the incidents they relate took place in a very different time and in a very different culture. In fact, the incidents they depict and the lessons they impart are at the very core of the Good News of Jesus Christ. These stories play out right in front of our eyes every single day and will continue to do so until that unknown day in the future when the Lord will return to bring His kingdom to its full fruition.

There are many threads that tie together today's Gospel and the Gospels for the next two weeks. One of them — one that's always timely, unfortunately — is the sinful impulse to make outcasts of others, however we define "otherness," and in reflecting on the Samaritan woman we met today, I found myself thinking of someone I met more than forty years ago now, Nineth Montenegro de Garcia, a Guatemalan woman.

I met Nineth through a friend of mine in D.C., Sister Rita, a Catholic nun who'd spent the better part of a decade serving the impoverished in a small community in rural Guatemala. Sister Rita thus had experienced firsthand many of the trials borne by the Guatemalan people. One night she told me about how, periodically, soldiers would arrive at the small compound she and the other Sisters used as a convent to evict them while the military confiscated it temporarily for its own purposes. When they were eventually allowed to return, Sister Rita related how the rough-hewn floorboards of their residence would sometimes ooze with the blood of those who'd met their end there. She and the other sisters would clean up as best they could, praying all the while for the victims and their tormentors. It was especially important to pray for the tormentors, Sister Rita told me, to avoid falling into the temptation of despair and hatred, because, she said, "otherwise we eventually become what we hate."

But by Guatemalan standards, Nineth was relatively well-off. She lived in the capital, Guatemala City. She was married and had several children. But life had taken a difficult turn

for Nineth as it had for many Guatemalans — most, perhaps — in the 1970s and early 1980s. Guatemala was then in the throes of a particularly brutal phase of a civil war that had already been flaring sporadically for ten years. Ultimately 200,000 Guatemalans would lose their lives, most of them at the hands of the Guatemalan military or government death squads.<sup>1</sup> Proportionately, that's the equivalent of 6.5 million Americans.

One of them was Nineth's husband, Edgar Fernando Garcia. He was an electrician and labor activist at the very large bottling plant Coca-Cola operated in Guatemala City. Being a trade union member, not to mention a union activist, was a dangerous thing to be in Guatemala, and one night in June, 1984 while their children were asleep and Nineth and her husband were chatting, a dozen or so National Guard members broke down their front door and took her husband away. She never saw him again. No one else ever did, either.

He like tens of thousands of others had been "disappeared," a common tactic among Central and Latin American regimes in that era as it still is today in places like El Salvador.<sup>2</sup> Someone, somewhere had rendered a secret verdict regarding their "otherness" and rendered them so "other" that they quite literally disappeared — for good.

Edgar been "othered," rendered an outcast as, by extension, had Nineth. But she refused to accept this. She soon formed the "Mutual Support Group" for families of the "disappeared," an organization that quickly grew to hundreds of members who documented cases of forced disappearances and protested them publicly. She was often threatened, and some members of the group were themselves murdered. Nonetheless, they persevered, and the "Mutual Support Group" was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. Nineth wasn't interested in prizes, though. She was concerned with helping families find out what had happened to their loved ones and in seeking justice in their name.<sup>3</sup> I met her during her

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<sup>1</sup> "New Details Emerge About Atrocities in Guatemala," United States Holocaust Museum, ushmm.org, <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/new-details-emerge-about-atrocities-in-guatemala>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, "El Salvador," Human Rights Watch, hrw.org, <https://www.hrw.org/americas/el-salvador>

<sup>3</sup> For more information about Nineth Montenegro de Garcia and her times, see <https://chatgpt.com/c/69a9b9b6-42e0-832c-a500-84ff0b1a4d45>

periodic trips to D.C. to implore Congress and the American government to suspend its effusive aid to the Guatemalan military, a plea that was always rejected.

The Guatemalan civil war ended in 1996 with a negotiated settlement between the government and various guerrilla and other opposition groups. As part of the settlement, a Commission for Historical Clarification was established to investigate the human rights abuses that had occurred during the conflict, over 90% of which were found to have been committed by military or government forces.<sup>4</sup> Over the next twenty years, Nineth's "Mutual Support Group" was instrumental in presenting evidence in numerous criminal trials that resulted in the conviction of dozens of senior military and government officials, and Nineth herself went on to become a member of the Guatemalan Congress

Nineth found out through bitter experience where the sinful impulse to make outcasts of others can lead, as did St. Paul from whom we heard in our Second Reading.

Whatever else one might say about him, one thing is certain: Paul had a fierce temper, as the church in Galatia found out, and he must have struggled mightily to contain it. He had little patience for those whom he regarded as obstructing the work of the Gospel, however unintentionally, as Peter and Barnabas both learned to their misfortune. Sometimes whole cities were targets of his displeasure. He left Antioch in a huff and never returned. Antioch was "on the list," as my Dad used to say about people and places that had irritated him.

In our therapeutic age, we naturally wonder what was behind Paul's "anger issues," as we might describe the chinks in his personality. We're not alone in this, though. Scholars and students of the New Testament down through the ages have wondered the same thing. Paul doesn't tell us much about this, but he does provide a clue. He mentioned to the church in Corinth that he suffered from "a thorn in the flesh," something so troublesome that he identifies it, figuratively at least, as "an angel of Satan" that "beat" him and robbed him of his peace.<sup>5</sup>

Since Paul never tells us just what his "thorn in the flesh" was, no one can be sure exactly what he was referring to, and there are a variety of theories about what he meant.

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<sup>4</sup> "Guatemala," The Center For Justice & Accountability, cja.org, <https://cja.org/where-we-work/guatemala/>

<sup>5</sup> 2 Cor 12:7 (NAB)

Some scholars think Paul's "thorn" referred to a health issue, extrapolating from the health concerns he mentions elsewhere in his letters. Some think he might have been referring to a speech impediment, since there are hints in his letters and in the Acts of the Apostles that perhaps he wasn't a very good preacher. Some think Paul was alluding to a specific person, perhaps a relative, who enjoyed tormenting him.

We can't be sure, but I have a suspicion that he wasn't referring to any of these things. I think he was referring to something he mentions in our Second Reading today. In writing to the church in Rome, Paul says something quite extraordinary. "Christ ... died ... for the ungodly," he proclaims, and he goes on to say, "Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>6</sup>

Think about that: though we don't deserve it, though we don't merit it, though we can't earn it, though we're unworthy of it, Christ died *for us*. Knowing full well that we're unworthy and undeserving, Christ died for us anyway, Paul writes. Not only that — He died for us *because we're unworthy*.

And that was Paul's "thorn," I suspect. Until he met the Risen Christ along the road to Damascus, Paul believed that faith, that salvation, was for those who followed the rules, those who colored between the lines, those who had earned God's love, those whose merit was unimpeachable, and that those who didn't follow the rules, those who didn't stay between the lines, those who hadn't earned God's love but only His withering judgment, those whose acts deserved only contempt, were condemned — and deserved to be. When he met the Risen Christ, though, Jesus said to him in effect, "No Paul. I died for you, you who have put innocent people to death," and Paul realized in an instant that he hadn't received from Christ the judgment he deserved, but the mercy he *didn't* deserve, and that in turn he was not to judge, not to condemn, but to extend to others the same merciful love of Christ with which he had

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<sup>6</sup> Rom 5:6-8 (NAB)

been embraced. The Paul, whose conduct deserved only condemnation, had become the Paul who'd been forgiven.

The outcast had become the disciple, but still, human nature being what it is, Paul apparently struggled with his own tendency to make outcasts of others. That was his “thorn,” that’s what sometimes robbed him of his peace, I think. He prayed and prayed, he says, for the Lord to remove this “thorn” of his, this impulse to condemn, but it never was. Finally Paul realized that the Lord hadn’t removed it precisely so that Paul would always be reminded that just as he had been embraced in mercy and forgiveness, so too in mercy and forgiveness was he to embrace others.

And he needed a reminder, it seems. Try as he might, struggle as he did, it seems that at times Paul simply forgot that *he* was the Samaritan woman at the well whom we meet in today’s Gospel. In John’s account of this encounter, he makes it clear that the Samaritan woman is an outcast — she’s triply outcast, in fact. She’s a Samaritan, a people despised by proper Jews. She’s a woman, and therefore unworthy of conversing with a rabbi, Jesus. And she’s come to the well alone. Hewing water is difficult and tiring work, and in the ancient world it was a community activity, one that was done early in the morning before the heat of the day grew intense. But the Samaritan woman must draw her water at noon, the worst possible time to do it, and she must do so by herself — all of which tells us she’s not only a pariah to proper Jews, she’s a pariah to her own people. By ethnicity, by gender, and by reputation, she had no business — none — being with a Jewish rabbi, let alone one who’s the Son of God.

Neither did Paul — Paul the murderer, Paul the persecutor.

In fact the only one who *does* think she (or Paul) has any business conversing with Jesus is, well, Jesus. It’s telling that Jesus Himself initiates the conversation with the Samaritan woman. He reaches out to her despite knowing of her past. Her sinfulness isn’t an impediment to His mercy; in fact, it’s the occasion for it.

Notice too that Jesus offers her His “living water”<sup>7</sup> without her first doing anything. He doesn’t tell her she must first repent; He doesn’t tell her she must first be converted; He doesn’t tell her she must somehow earn it; He doesn’t tell her she must first be somehow deserving of it. He offers it freely. She does of course repent, and she is of course converted. But her repentance and conversion are the *effects* of Christ’s mercy, not the preconditions of it.

She isn’t the only one who receives Christ’s unmerited mercy. What does the Samaritan woman do after her encounter with Jesus, after she has tasted firsthand the “living water” of a new life in Christ? She returns to her town and shares it. She *shares* it with the very people who scorned her and made her an outcast. She’s become an early example of something Jesus revealed to St. Faustina: “I am more generous toward sinners than toward the just. It was for their sake that I came down from heaven; it was for their sake that My Blood was spilled. Let them not fear to approach Me; they are most in need of My mercy.”<sup>8</sup>

The Church insists that any time a parish has catechumens to be baptized at the Easter Vigil the entire parish must hear the story of the Samaritan woman at the well on the Third Sunday of Lent regardless of the liturgical year because all of us need to be reminded that Christ’s mercy and forgiveness are not something of which we and others must first be worthy. “Let them not fear to approach Me,” the Lord said to St. Faustina; neither must we be afraid to approach others with the same mercy He’s extended to us.

We hear it because when the Samaritan woman approaches the well, she brings Paul and all of us along with her, for all of us have been a stranger, an outcast, at one time or another, in one way or another. “You shall not oppress a stranger ... for you were strangers in the land of Egypt,”<sup>9</sup> the Lord commands.

We hear it too because all of us, like Paul, have our thorns in the flesh, the thorns that distract us from embracing the new life to which we’ll be called at Easter, the new life into

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<sup>7</sup> Jn 4:10 (NAB)

<sup>8</sup> Kowalska, Saint Maria Faustina, *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul* (Marian Press: Kindle Edition), 1275

<sup>9</sup> Ex 23:9 (NAB)

which we're to invite others whether or not some consider them outcasts. And for some of us, perhaps many of us, that thorn is a readiness to condemn and cast away when we're called to forgive and to welcome.

We live in a time of thorns, an era of an endless designation of outcasts. We live in a time when a steady stream of societally-designated pariahs are making their way to the well, alone, and condemned by their supposed betters. What will we offer them? The "living water" of the Risen Lord, or the judgment that has been spared we ourselves only through the grace of Christ?

"Where then can you get this living water?", the Samaritan woman asks Jesus.<sup>10</sup> At no time, perhaps, has the world been in greater need of "living water," and at no time, perhaps, has it been dispensed so sparingly by those entrusted with it. When others ask this question of us, may we be able to answer, "You can find living water here. Here. With us. With us."

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<sup>10</sup> Jn 4:11 (NAB)