

Today, we are on the third Sunday of Lent, and we are hearing about a third journey. On the first Sunday, we heard about Jesus taking a journey into the desert where he refought the battle against the devil and sin which Adam and Eve lost in the Garden of Eden. Last Sunday, we heard about Abraham's journey to begin the restoration of humanity to the noble purpose for which God had created them: to be God's intermediaries and teach the rest of creation about himself. In today's journey, Jesus and the apostles are on their way to Galilee. In the verse before what we just heard, John tells us that Jesus "had to pass through Samaria." Jesus didn't have to go through Samaria. Most Jews avoided Samaria because it was too dangerous for them on account of the hatred between the two cultures. Why did Jesus lead his companions into such danger? He had business to attend to at the well which involved another type of restoration.

First though, who were the Samaritans? Why such enmity between Jews and Samaritans? Were these two random neighbors who were forced to live next to each other but never tried to understand each other and each other's cultures and backgrounds? No...actually they had been part of the same family. Here is the short version of the history leading up to today's gospel. Samaria is in central Palestine with Galilee to the north and Judah to the south. At one time, that entire region was part of the Kingdom of David populated by the different tribes of Israel who were descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (read Genesis!). After David and Solomon, the kingdom split in two and Samaria became the capital of the Northern kingdom while Jerusalem remained the capital of Judah in the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians and they deported some Israelites and resettled foreigners in those lands. The remaining Israelites began to adopt the religious practices of the non-Israelites and began to intermarry with them. Although they still worshipped the God of Israel, the Samaritans did it in a different way and built their own temple on Mount Gerizim in Samaria. This form of worship was illegitimate in the eyes of the Jews and by and by the different forms of worship led to the hatred and violence in the background of today's gospel. At one time Jew and Samaritan had been part of the same family, and the worst form of warfare is a civil war.

That was a quick summary of the historical facts...but what really happened? Genesis tells us: "Adam and Eve heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And the man said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." The Lord God said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate."

The tension we heard about in today's gospel actually had its seeds planted after the Fall in the Garden of Eden. The consequence of original sin was the loss of communion within the human family. Adam blamed Eve. This is the loss of communion between man and woman, husband and wife—we see expressed in the gospel with the woman's question, "How can you, a Jew [a male Jew], ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" Eve blamed the serpent (which is symbolic not only of our spiritual war with the devil but also with our less than ideal dealings with the rest of creation). That much is obvious, but did you catch what Adam really said: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." The woman whom YOU gave. It is God's fault because he created Eve. Communion within the human family was broken because communion with God was broken, not because of what God did, but because of what humans did. If Communion with God is broken, we cannot have communion with each other, even those we are closest to. If communion within the family is broken, how can we hope to have communion with those outside of the family?

Jesus' journey to Samaria and his encounter with the Samaritan woman was part of his Father's plan to restore communion between God and man and within the human community. It would be a good idea to go home and spend the week reading and praying with this gospel to find out how Jesus went about doing that.

Right now, though, we need to turn our attention towards ourselves. Part of Jesus' work of redeeming us was restoring our broken communion. He is inviting us to help him in this work. How are we agents of communion? How do we contribute to the destruction of communion? This applies to our relationships at home, at work, at school, in our parishes, in the wider local civic community and the broader Christian community. How do we behave towards people of different races, cultures, political ideologies, and religions—including Judaism and Islam. Just because someone treats you as their enemy, it does not give you the right to treat that person as your enemy. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Finally, most importantly, what does our relationship with God look like? Are we working on it? Or are we, like Adam and Eve, hiding from God? When God asked them, "Where are you?" and "What have you done?" He already knew the answer to those questions. He was giving them the chance to take responsibility for their sins and seek reconciliation. That could have been the first Confession. We cannot say what might have happened had Adam and Eve accepted that invitation. But we can say with certainty what will happen if we decide to accept that same invitation. Through the ministry of the Church given to it by Jesus, we will be absolved of our sins and welcomed home. Restoration of communion within the human family begins with restoration of our communion with God. Let us seek reconciliation with God so that we can be agents of Jesus' peace in the world.