

3d SUNDAY OF LENT – A (March 27, 2011)
(Fr. Jerry Kopacek)

What a beautiful and powerful gospel passage we have just heard! Not only is it of unusual length, but it also has a richness of meaning on multiple levels. First of all, the human nature of Jesus shows itself plainly—after a long walk through hot, dry, dusty terrain, Jesus is tired and thirsty as any of us would be and as Moses and the grumbling Israelites were in the desert after leaving slavery in Egypt. Then he asks the Samaritan woman for a drink—which scandalizes her and later on his own disciples. Traditionally there was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans; St. John indicates that the former considered the latter unclean. And then comes the extended conversation between Jesus and the woman. She had to be startled and perhaps more than a little embarrassed when Jesus mentioned her five previous husbands and her current ‘live-in boyfriend’. But through it all, this woman came to an ever-deeper and ever-growing understanding that this man just might be the One for whom she and her people had been waiting—the Messiah, the Christ.

But this woman was not the only one to experience thirst in this story. Jesus was also thirsty, even after quenching his bodily thirst with a drink from Jacob’s well. He thirsted for this woman’s faith and for her loving acceptance of Jesus as the living water “welling up to eternal life.” Yes, Jesus challenged her on the need to change her sinful ways, but he also reassured her that he was indeed the Messiah and the Christ and Savior that she was looking for. And in just the same way, Jesus thirsts for us and for our faith in and love for him; he likewise wants us to thirst for him. Jesus seeks out each and every one of us individually and personally as if we were the only person in existence—not because he kind of likes us, but because he loves us with a passion that we cannot ever begin to imagine. And we all thirst for Christ and for the living water only he can provide—even if we are not always aware of that thirst.

The sacraments are certainly a uniquely powerful way by which Jesus satisfies our thirst for his grace, strength and love. We recall the waters of baptism by which we are cleansed of original sin and incorporated into the Body of Christ...and we continue to pray for those among us who are preparing for baptism and the others sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil. Then there are the two great sacraments of healing: anointing of the sick (which we will celebrate at all the Masses next weekend—check the bulletin for details on who can receive anointing) and reconciliation (or penance or confession). Lent is the most appropriate time in the whole Church year to make a good confession. This season is all about calling ourselves to account, to be honest about our sins instead of the excuses, justifications, or just plain spiritual laziness we can all be prone to. And just as that woman at the well needed Jesus’ challenging words regarding the conversion to which she was called, we hear that same challenge and call—even if we don’t want to, even if it makes us squirm a bit. I have certainly talked about confession before, and I will again even after today. I do so mainly because it is such a priceless and powerful gift of God’s grace and mercy. Those of you who receive this sacrament at least once or twice a year, if not more often—you know what I mean.

A number of questions about confession continue to come up. One of the most frequent: ‘why do I have to confess my sins to a priest; why can’t I confess directly to God?’ Of course we can always confess directly to God, and I hope we all do. But Jesus very clearly gave us this sacrament in John ch. 20 when he gave the apostles a direct role in his work of forgiveness of sins. And the Church has preserved this sacrament from the very beginning of the Church, even as the details of its celebration have changed over the centuries. Jesus never did anything for no reason; why would we want to ignore his gift of mercy or think we don’t need it? You might as well ask: “why do I have to go to a doctor to help me get better; why can’t I just ask God to heal me?”

Another question has to do with those folks who have not been to confession for a long time and may be afraid of what the priest might say or may feel embarrassed because they don’t remember how or what to

confess. Regarding those who simply have been away from the sacrament for a long time, I love the story told by Fr. Benedict Groeschel, one of my favorite spiritual writers. He tells of a woman who once came to him and began by saying: “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned—I haven’t been to confession for 60 years.” Father’s response? “Madam, you’ve just made my day!” He rejoiced with and for this woman who at long last had come back to quench her thirst for the living waters of grace. Any priest worth his salt will do the same thing. It is always a special joy for me to hear the confession of someone who has been away from the Church or this sacrament a long time, and I always try to remember to thank them for doing so. Remember: the Church is all about Jesus Christ and leading us to him or back to him. The sacrament of confession is a uniquely powerful means to help that mission—and is therefore something to celebrate with genuine joy.

What about those who do not know or remember how to go to confession? That’s easy—just say that to the priest. He will be more than happy to help you through every part of the sacrament; that’s what we are there for. Besides that, many resources are available. In our pamphlet racks we have copies of this guide for preparing for confession from the Worship office in Dubuque—it is very good. Even our high-tech age has caught up with confession. You may have read or heard recently about a new app for your iPhone or iPad called “Confession: a Roman Catholic App”. Contrary to some of the sensationalist media reports, this is not a replacement for confession, nor is it a way to confess across the internet. It is simply a digital resource to help you examine your conscience and prepare for confession. One of my brother priests has it on his phone, and it really looks helpful—providing an examination of conscience based on your age and state in life (teenager, married person, priest or religious, and so on). Now, I know nothing about iPhones or apps; I have enough trouble sometimes just trying to figure out email... But if you think this app might be of help, by all means check it out.

Another concern I hear a lot: ‘confession doesn’t do me any good; I just keep bringing up the same old sins and I’ll probably commit them again.’ On one level, I completely understand that because it happens to me too. But that just helps us grow in humility since it reminds us that we always need the grace of God to battle those temptations that keep coming our way. But let’s think about this a bit more. What would happen if you decided: “you know, I don’t know why I bother to take a bath or shower or brush my teeth each day; after all, I’m only going to get dirty again.” Or: “it’s really a waste of time cleaning the house or straightening out the garage—it’s just going to get all messed up again.” Or: “I’m not going to have anything to eat today—I just have the same thing and I’ll get hungry again later on anyway.” Silly comparisons? I don’t think so. We do these things over and over again because we need to for our health and peace of mind. Why would we not want to see to the condition of our immortal souls—in other words, do a little spiritual housecleaning--on a regular basis as well? That is precisely what confession is all about and that is why Jesus gave it to us. Why would we ignore such a great gift?

[Tomorrow]/This afternoon we will host a communal penance service with individual confessions at 3 p.m. here in the church; four other priests will be here to help with those confessions. So for those of you who are reluctant to go to your own pastor for confession, there goes that excuse! Over the next couple of weeks our students (both from Catholic grade and high schools and our religious education program) will have the opportunity for confession during their class time, and it’s always a privilege to visit with them. I really encourage the rest of you to take advantage of this communal service, especially since I won’t be able to schedule as many extra times for individual confessions as I have in the past. If you had a bad experience with a priest in confession in the past, I’m truly sorry—but don’t let that keep you away from experiencing the mercy of Jesus now; don’t be a slave to the past. This sacrament is an amazing gift of grace—Jesus’ assurance of forgiveness of sins in our past and his promise of strength to help us grow in holiness and peace as we move forward. These are graces Jesus longs to give us; we thirst for them as the woman at the well thirsted for the God who asked her for a drink. Who would not jump at the chance to receive such treasures?