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Lent 3A – March 19, 2017

The consequences of not knowing who you are and whose you are is a preoccupation with otherness and a disconnection from your fellow human beings. Today's Gospel shows Jesus transcending the illusion of otherness in his interactions with a Samaritan woman at a well, and his disciples negative reaction to his fraternizing with her. Jews despised Samaritans. They believed they were better than them because they worshipped at Mt. Zion and the Samaritans at Mt. Gerizim. It was one of the many conventional bigotries of the time. Men thought they were superior to women. And women who were not under the protection of a husband or father were looked down upon by everyone. It was because of these conventions that the Samaritan woman was shocked by Jesus' request that she draw him some water from the well. And Jesus cut through all of the otherness saying, "If you knew the gift of God..."

"If you knew the gift of God." It gets right to the heart of the matter. He could have also said, "If you knew how beloved you are."

And, when Jesus used water from the well as a metaphor for eternal life, she still didn't get it, just like Nicodemus last week. Only when Jesus, not so subtly pointed out a sad fact of her life, in the same breath dismissed it, then revealed his identity to her - only then did she begin to let go of her otherness and to realize her belovedness. She couldn't help but to spread the good news throughout Samaria. "If you knew the gift of God."

And, the poor disciples, who still hoped Jesus would put the Pharisees in their place, dispossess the wealthy, and lead Israel to victory over the Romans. They're shocked by seeing their Master speaking with a Samaritan woman and try to distract him with food. (It's my favorite distraction!) "I have food to eat that you do not know about," he replies, and confuses them even more. Of course they didn't know the sustenance he possessed. They were still shocked by his talking to a Samaritan woman.

If they only knew the gift of God.

Throughout his life Jesus chose to be among the outsiders – women, Pharisees, tax collectors, rabble-rousers, sinners, Romans, Samaritans, the poor, the rich, the lame, the insane. He shattered any possible notion that God loves some more than others. And, yet we persist.

Are not the troubles of our world, indeed the troubles of our own lives tied to the illusion that we are superior to others - religiously, politically, economically, morally. Or even worse, clinging to the notion that the needs of others have nothing to do with us, that we're not responsible for the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. We busy ourselves trying to be better than others or pointing

out the inferiority of others. We spend our lives attempting to measure-up to the standards and conventions of our various groups and judging ourselves and those who do not measure up. It's what divides our world and our country. It's what separates us from God. It's the poisonous wellspring of hatred and violence. In Tucson this week there was a tragic example of what clinging to the illusion of otherness can do. A man broke into a mosque and desecrated copies of the Quran. I expect he probably thought he was doing the right thing, shaming the followers of an inferior religion. Heartbreaking. However, in the same week we saw a beautiful example of people acting out their belovedness when members of a local synagogue began a fund drive to repair the damage to the Muslim worship space and buy new sacred books. In a few short days they've raised thousands. Jesus smiles.

Jesus showed us we're no one of us better than the other. Each one of us a saint... and each a sinner. A bit of good in the worst of us, a bit of bad in the best of us. And, there's nothing we can do to change that...and most importantly, it doesn't matter in the eyes of God.

If you knew the gift of God...

Who is worthy of God's great gift - Christians, Jews, Muslims, Americans, Russians, Democrats, Republicans, Latinos, Anglos - none of us is worthy. All have varying degrees of unworthiness, and thankfully, it isn't what matters. For some wonderful, outrageous, impossible reason God loves us without condition - always has, always will. It's how God is. And, God wants us to believe that.

When we stop trying to seek our own worthiness, and surrender in faith to God's love, that's when the fountain begins to flow. That's when we realize that what we were seeking, we had all the time, and all we can do is learn to enjoy it and share it. That's when we know the gift of God.