

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT, Year A
Ex 17:3-7; Ps 95:1-2,6-7,8-9; Rom 5:1-2,5-8; Jn 4:5-42

***TAKE YOUR PICK:
FIVE OR SIX HUSBANDS,
OR THE ONE TRUE GOD***

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun
Saturday, March 18, 2017, 5:00 p.m. Mass
Sunday, March 19, 2017, 8:30 and 10:30 a.m. Masses

We'll start with a very little joke, OK?
Why did the cookie go to the doctor?
Because it was feeling a little crummy!

Today's gospel is one of the most misunderstood of all gospel texts.

Let's go straight to the **most confusing part**.
Jesus asked the **woman** about **her husband** (Jn 4:16).
She replied, "***I do not have a husband***" (Jn 4:17a).
Jesus responded, "***You are right!***" (Jn 4:17b).
And then he added the stinging comment: "***You've had five husbands,
and the one you are living with now is not your husband***" (Jn 4:18).

So we have a **woman** who is living with her **sixth husband**.
That's a lot of husbands.
Maybe we should be reading about her in a **tabloid** rather than the **Bible**.

Almost everyone takes this **gospel** at **face value**, for its **apparent surface meaning**,
and think that Jesus is upset with **divorce** and **remarriage**,
or he is upset with too **many partners** and **sexual immorality**.
But that is **not the meaning** at all.

Please remember that **John**, who wrote this gospel,
like to use **metaphors** or **figures of speech**.
John is using **Old Testament imagery**,
and most of us are **not** all that **familiar** with the **Old Testament**,
so it is no wonder that **we don't grasp** the **underlying message**.

Let's go digging.

The **gospel** is set in a **marriage context**.
Jesus had just come from the **Cana marriage feast** (Jn 2:1-11).
And, **Jesus** sat down next to a **well** (Jn 4:6).

In ancient society,
the **well** was where **single guys** went looking for that one **special lady**.
And the well was where **single gals, hopeful bride-to-be's**,
went looking for that one **special guy**.

There are **many match-making stories in the Old Testament** near a well:
Isaac's future wife **Rebekah** was found at a well (Gn 24);
Jacob met his future wife **Rachel** at a well (Gn 29:1-30);
Moses found his wife **Zipporah** at a well (Ex 2:15-22).

Did Jesus go to the well looking to get married?
Kind of, but not exactly.

There is an **overarching spiritual marriage theme** at play here.

The “**great marriage**” of the **Old Testament** is not between a man and a woman,
but between **God** and the **Israelites**.
God is the **husband**,
the **Jewish people** are the **bride**,
and their sacred **marriage bond** is the **covenant**.

Therefore, every time the **Jewish people** turned to a **false god**,
they were considered **unfaithful** to their **exclusive “marriage”** to the one true God,
and they were considered **adulterers, untrue** to their **marriage** (Hos 2:4,15).

Let us **apply** this **marriage imagery** to the **Samaritans**.

Geographically, Samaria is the **central** part of Israel.
“The Galilee” is in the north, Samaria is central, Judea is south.
From **c. 1200 BC** (the time of the Judges) **until 722 BC** (the Assyrian Invasion),
Samaria was **solidly Jewish** (the tribes of Issachar, Manasseh, and Ephraim).
So for roughly **500 years**, Samaria was **faithful** to its **exclusive marriage to God**.

After **Samaria** was **conquered** by **Assyria** (modern-day Syria) in 722 BC,
good Jewish people who had been faithful to Yahweh alone
did **not** remain **true to the covenant**.

After the conquest, a large contingent of **Assyrians** settled in Samaria,
and they **brought** their **pagan gods** with them.
Subsequently, a number of **Jews** who still lived in the area,
those who were not deported,
intermarried with their new neighbors.
When it came to their faith, some Jews **abandoned** their **faith entirely**.
Others Jews tried to **mix** their **Jewish faith** with one of the **pagan cults** (syncretism),
(2 Kgs 17:32-41), which, of course, doesn't work.

There were **five different Assyrian pagan gods**:

Marduk, Nergal, Ashima (2 Kgs 17:30), **Nibhaz**, and **Tartak** (2 Kgs 17:31)
(see Brown, R. E., *John I-XII AB* 29, 171).

[Alternate theories: the five gods of Samaria, the five books of the Samaritan Pentateuch,
or non-symbolically, that she in fact did have multiple husbands
(see Moloney, F. J., *John*, 131-132)].

Please notice, the **Samaritan woman** had **five husbands**.
Assyria had **five different pagan gods**.

The **woman** represents the **Samaritan people**;

that's why she is nameless (Jn 4:7).

It was **not** the **woman** who had **five different husbands**,
but it was the **Samaritan people** who had turned to **five different false gods**,
and by turning to these false gods,
the **Samaritans broke the marriage covenant** with the **God of Israel**.

Then Jesus said to the Samaritan woman,

“and the husband that you are now living with is not your husband” (paraphrase, Jn 4:18).

When Jesus went to Samaria in roughly 30 AD,

the **Samaritans** had **quit** their **five “marriages”** to **Assyrian pagan cults**
and turned to something new.

The **Romans** were in power,

and the **Roman army** was occupying **Samaria**,

and the **Romans brought** their own **pagan gods** with them.

The Samaritans, to placate their oppressors,

entered a **new “marriage”** with the **pantheon of Roman pagan gods**,
gods like Jupiter, Apollo, Venus, Mars, and Neptune.

Jesus was saying to the Samaritans, “The **Roman gods** are **not your husband**!

Nor were the five Assyrian gods that you had earlier your husband!” (paraphrase, Jn 4:17-18).

The introduction to this gospel passage said Jesus **“HAD TO GO to Samaria”** (Jn 4:4).

Under the **direction of God**, his **Father**, and with the **Holy Spirit**, his **inspiration** and **guide**,

Jesus needed to go to Samaria

to **plead** with the people to **quit** their **false gods**, and

ask them to **return** to their **original exclusive marriage** to the **God of Israel**.

Jesus did not want to get married to the woman at the well.

Jesus **wanted** the people of **Samaria**, originally faithful Jews,

to **return** to their **marriage** to the **one true God**,

and he used the **woman** as his **instrument** to invite them back.

You see, **this puzzling passage** is not about divorce and remarriage,
nor is it about immorality.

It is **about honoring** the one **true God** and not following false gods.

Now this may not seem like it applies to you and me, but it does.

When it comes to false gods,

you and me, we may not worship

Marduk, Nergal, Ashima (2 Kgs 17:30), Nibhaz, and Tartak (2 Kgs 17:31).

There are not many among us who worship Roman pagan gods either,
gods like Jupiter, Apollo, Venus, Mars, or Neptune.

Modern Americans have different false gods,

idols, things in our lives that get **more attention than** our one true **God**.

Most of it revolves around **materialism**.

We worship stuff: homes, cabins, nice cars,

beautiful clothes, expensive jewelry, exotic vacations,

RVs, snowmobiles, boats, computers,

investments, collectibles, and so on.

Sometimes we worship **ourselves**,

or **our ambitions**, our careers, achievements,

or having **our way** all the time;

or **pleasure**, wanting a fun time all the time – for me.

Often we **devote** so much **time to other pursuits**

that they become the **prime focus of our attention**,

and when something other than God is the prime focus of our attention,

it is **a false god**, we are **idolaters**, and we are no better than the Samaritans.

Jesus was thirsting for the Samaritan **woman's belief** (see Jn 4:7).

Actually, he **wanted** all **Samaria** to **believe in him**.

And **Jesus wants** our **exclusive allegiance**, too!

This gospel is not about marriage and remarriage.

It is not about multiple partners and sexual immorality.

It is about being married to the one true God alone,

and breaking up with false gods.

False gods will always **leave us thirsty**.

Jesus has living water that wells up unto **everlasting life** (Jn 4:14).