

Hope and the Samaritan Woman

In our second reading, from the fifth chapter of Romans—and actually the fifth verse of the fifth chapter—we hear that one line: “Hope does not disappoint.”

Now, it strikes our ears a little bit odd. The reason is because everything in the Bible, of course, is a translation, and it’s very hard to get across ideas sometimes in their fullness. So we do the best we can. I dug into the verse a bit because that verse has always struck me. As I dove into the words that are actually used, a better way to say it, in terms of the way the sentence is rendered, is: hope does not shame us. It’s a verb. So “disappoint” is the opportunity to try to get at the verb sense so it doesn’t sound weird. But what it really says is: hope doesn’t shame us.

The better way to actually construct the sentence, in my view—and I’m not a high-level biblical scholar, but in looking at the sentence structure—the better way to put it in terms of the idea Paul is trying to get across is that hope takes away our shame. I’ll say that again. The better way to say it, I think, in terms of the sentence structure and the actual force of the idea, is that hope takes away our shame.

Now, shame is something that we’re all familiar with, at least at some part of our life. I think shame is important to look at because of the Gospel reading today and this Samaritan woman’s own inner life, whatever is going on there.

We don’t know what happened with the five husbands. We don’t know if all five died off early and she was in a situation like in the book of Tobit, almost being accused of murder. Probably some of those, at least—maybe all of them—were messy divorces or breakups. But what I can say almost for sure, in terms of her spunky exterior and the way she interacts with the Lord, is that she is certainly an outcast. That’s why she’s coming to the well at the hottest time of day. She’s not going to run into anyone or have to deal with gossip. That’s almost for sure. All the Fathers of the Church said this: no one gathers water at noon when it’s hot. You gather in the morning and in the evening when it’s not hot.

So her own inner life must somehow be tied up in this shame. Shame essentially says, “There’s something wrong with me.” And of course, if she’s been abandoned or divorced multiple times, that lie is probably planted pretty deeply within her.

What happens? Hope comes. Hope is Christ. He comes, and He manages through this conversation to take away her shame.

He Has Not Changed the Subject

I want to get at another piece before I talk about what I think this means for us, in terms of the way Christ engages her in dialogue. Let's go back to these two lines that follow each other.

After engaging her, and getting her to engage and have this hope and openness and even desire, maybe, for what the Lord is offering—even though she doesn't understand what it is yet—she says, “Sir, give me this water so that I might not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

Then it seems disjointed, as if Jesus is changing the subject. Jesus follows: “Go call your husband and come back.”

Listen again. It sounds disjointed: “Sir, give me this water so that I might not be thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” Jesus said to her, “Go call your husband and come back.”

He didn't actually change the subject. It sounds like it, but He didn't change the subject. It's disjointed, and He shifted the conversation, but He is on the same subject.

How is that? She has articulated her thirst, and He is moving in to help her see that these relationships have not satisfied her thirst. Do you see it? He hasn't changed the subject. He's on the same subject. It's very intentional.

“Sir, give me this water so that I might not be thirsty and have to keep coming here to drink.”

“Go call your husband and come back.”

And He does it so gently. If hope takes away shame, it has to be gentle, right? The Lord has to rehabilitate her and help her realize that her thirst is not properly directed. It has led to some messy stuff in her life—whose life isn't messy? But He is trying to show her that He has come to satisfy the longing of her heart.

As the preface will say, He thirsted for her faith and He kindled in her the fire of divine love. The Lord is super gentle with her. He doesn't bring it up to accuse her. He brings it up just to place it there. And the Lord is incredibly gentle.

Hope undoes our shame, so to speak. Hope helps us understand that we are made in God's image and likeness, and we are infinitely good. At the core of who we are is being made in the image and likeness of God and being a beloved child of God. That's the fundamental reality.

A Conversation That Leads to Conversion

What is the point for us today? I think the point is this: she is in danger of salvation. I say it that way. She is in a good place for salvation because she is not operating under the illusion that everything is okay in her life.

If we are operating under the illusion that pretty much all is well, then we don't really need the Lord. But if we're being real, we recognize the fact that we're not as grounded as we should be. We recognize that our hearts are restless. We recognize that things are not necessarily all well. Maybe they're fairly well with us, maybe not. But look at the world. I mean, all is not well. We need a Savior.

So what I want to point out, in terms of how this happens and the practical takeaway for us, is: how does the Lord do it? How does the Lord bring her to salvation?

A conversation. That's it. It's a conversation. Not judgmental. Not coming at her, throwing her sins in her face. Calling her to conversion? Yes. And calling her to properly calibrate her thirst. But it's a simple conversation. That's how conversion happens.

So what does that mean for us? My challenge for us is that, as we continue this Lenten journey, if your spiritual life seems kind of rote at this point—even if your prayer is pretty solid, but there are a lot of Hail Marys, Our Fathers, rote prayers—those are great. Those are great bases for prayer. But try to make it more conversational: to engage the Lord Jesus directly about what's on your heart, your joys, your concerns, your cares; to just bring the entire life before Him.

Because in that conversation, we encounter not just our Savior, but the One who knows us better than we know ourselves and desires to bring consolation and peace to those areas of our heart that maybe we keep shielded from Him.

When we receive Him in the Eucharist, we receive Him in a most intimate way. And so may the other six days a week, in terms of our relationship with Him, be equally intimate. As we receive His heart into our heart, may we always bring ourselves fully to Him.

So dear friends, as we receive the Eucharist, let us thank the Lord for this gift, and ask Him to help us more and more to conversion by experiencing His love and His grace. Praise be Jesus Christ.