

We like to divide people into groups, especially it seems during an election year. There are those who voted the current administration into office and then there are the others, the outsiders. Of course, there are those who will vote the next administration into office and again some others, the outsiders. We find it more important to stress who is in and out of office than to focus on our common heritage, common love for our country, courteous respect for our elected officials; our divisiveness even overpowers our civility.

Of course, there are many other ways to quickly divide people into insiders and outsiders: income level, education, faith tradition, place of origin, gender, even respectability (however one might determine that). I was reminded how far the subtle division between insiders and outsiders extends by a recent phone call from my niece. She was calling from Cambridge to let me know that she had just become engaged. I was pleased, even honored, that she took the time from her very busy medical school life to call just to let me know the happy news rather than sending out the customary engagement announcement. By the end of the conversation, I realized she had really called because I was an outsider, an aged, out of date outsider who was not likely to see, without significant assistance and prodding, their video announcement posted multiple places on the internet.

#### Insiders - Outsiders.

Today's gospel reading tells of a meeting between two people. As in politics and so many other areas, who is the insider and outsider depends upon perspective.

The woman at the well is on her own territory - this is the well that serves her town, this is where she lives. As the story evolves, we find that she is a very bright and knowledgeable woman: she knows well her own religious traditions as well as those of the stranger she encounters. True, there is a hint of scandal in her past since Jewish rabbis considered three marriages as an acceptable limit compared to her five. But perhaps she had had some bad luck, had outlived many men; perhaps she had made

some bad selections in spouses. If she were as bad as some portray her, would five men have married her? True, she isn't married to the man she is with now; but we don't know the circumstances. She is friendly to strangers in a land more steeped in confrontation than friendship. Perhaps the fact that she is gathering water at mid-day suggests that there is some tension between her and others who would normally gather water in the early morning. She is a very interesting mixture of definite insider and possible disreputable outsider.

Then this true outsider appears. Clearly, he is not from around there; clearly, he is not even a Samaritan. He starts out by breaking social convention: he talks to her! No proper and respectable man, Jew or Samaritan, would start a conversation with a strange woman, especially when they are alone. And to ask her for water no less! That is a scandalous proposition; at a minimum, it is an implied question of her availability! Her reply is an indignant "I can not imagine you asking me for a drink!" Even stranger, he was willing to engage her in a theological discussion about water of all things.

The woman quickly puts her finger on what it is that makes this man such an obvious outsider: he appears to be a prophet! A prophet speaks the truth; speaks truth inspired by God. He is telling her truths about herself that no foreigner could possibly know. There are few true prophets, perhaps only one or a couple every few centuries. Prophets are seldom popular for they declare God's truth to ears that have not been listening. Prophets are such outsiders that they often have drastically shortened lives; shortened by those they have come to serve. Everything, race, religion, socially surprising behavior, even disreputable and suggestive questions, being a prophet all shout out: this man is an outsider!

Insiders - Outsiders.

If she had only known how much of an outsider this man truly was. His own people refused to listen to him, chasing him out of temple and synagogue. The few religious leaders who were intrigued by what he taught were unwilling to be seen with

him; they would secretly visit only under the cloak of night. Other leaders scorned him, asking him endless questions merely to test or trap him, to demonstrate how much better their religious training was than his; how much better they knew and kept the rules of their faith. Even his own family had tried to get him out of sight from the public, fearing for his own safety.

But, there were some things about him, something that in spite of his lack of respectability, his being a foreigner, of a different faith, intrigued this woman. She was intrigued enough to carry on this conversation that quickly evolved to living water, water that drunk only once would keep people from ever being thirsty again, water that would give life, eternal life. He might be an outsider and a prophet and a Jew and, well, socially awkward and whatever, but even such an outsider with radical thoughts might be worth listening to.

In the comfort of our modern views, in our rapid, even instinctive judgment of who is an insider and outsider, we can get this story all wrong. As we hear it through our modern trained hearing, we instinctively think that Jesus is the insider, part of the majority, at least part of the in crowd; just like we are. And the woman, well, we are all too quick to judge her an outsider, even an outcast. We are quick to stereotype her into some other, demeaning, role; one perhaps not welcomed into our crowd.

If there is something that most clearly demonstrates that Jesus is an outsider it is that he talks with her, discusses theology with her. Jesus treats her with respect, if not even as an equal. As a minimum, she is his brightest, most astute student to date. As they delve into the concept of living water, she rapidly grasps the implications; implications from an outsider that confront, even contradict, her life long insiders' perspective. Jesus offers her, regardless of her nationality, faith or background, a gift beyond reason. Jesus offers her the gift of living water.

Jesus knows her background, her present. Whether the village considers her an outsider is unimportant. For Jesus, only one distinction is important, only one factor

determines the difference between an insider and outsider. That distinction is inherent in the three questions that Jesus asks her:

Do you know who I am?  
Do you know what I offer?  
Do you know how to get it?

Not only did she discover the answers, she sought this gift of living water. Then she eagerly went off to tell her whole village what she had found, what she had received. She had found the Messiah! In reality, the Messiah had found her!

During our Lenten journey, lets not be too quick to judge who is an insider, who is an outsider. It made no difference to Jesus, the ultimate outsider. He treated all who sought him with compassion, dignity and respect, regardless of their background. Even those who were not seriously listening, he still left the offer open, gave them the chance to reconsider. Likewise, all are welcome to join us on our trip to the cross and beyond. No one is excluded due to background or ..... or any other reason. Let us invite everyone along, lovingly treating all people with respect and compassion and dignity as Jesus did.

The ultimate outsider still challenges us. Never before or since has God walked the earth as a human. Never before has someone, God, challenged all of mankind with such simple and direct questions:

Do you know who I am?  
Do you know what I offer?  
Do you know how to get it?

Jesus is still asking, asking us, these simple and direct questions.

Lord, open our hearts and minds to clearly hear these questions. Convince us, like the woman at the well, that it is Jesus, Son of God, who offers us the gift of living water, free for the asking. And may we go, telling our whole village that the Messiah has found us! Amen