

This last Friday, over a meatless meal, Judy and I had a discussion about Lent and the practice of not eating meat, but why we can eat fish, can we eat soup with beef broth - but no beef in it? What about eggs? To tell you the truth, we have had this conversation almost every Lent over the last 25 years or so with no new revelations or sparks of insight.

The answers we always seem to come up with are, 'because', 'probably not' and 'maybe'.

Later I realized that, while it was an enjoyable conversation, it was only about a few dietary rules. These are important Lenten practices, but hardly what Lent is about.

Lent is a special time of prayer, penance, sacrifice and good works in preparation of the celebration of Easter.

Lent is a time of looking inward. We hear in our first reading from Exodus, the Israelites were grumbling, even after the amazing things God had done for them (Ex 17:3-7). In them, we might recognize ourselves, our own attitudes. In them we recognize our own spiritual thirst.

But in the early days of the Church, Lent was not so much a time to focus inward. It was time for Christians to focus outward.

By the early **days of the Church Fathers**, certainly by 250 AD the whole Church fasted, prayed, and give alms for the forty days preceding Easter. But Catholics did this primarily for the sake of **others rather than themselves.**

These others were new Catholics to be baptized or received into the Church at Easter and penitent Catholics to be readmitted to communion.

It seems we ought to **recover this ancient tradition** and do penance for and with those who will enter or return to the Church at Easter. But there is something else that we need to do. There are millions more who should be returning or entering into Christ's Church. **We need to tell them about Jesus. We need to evangelize.**

The second Vatican Council and all Popes since teach that **all** Catholics are called to evangelize in both deed **and** word.

To evangelize is not just a task undertaken from time to time; or even most of the time. It is, to put it simply a part of the Church's defining identity; it is, in many ways, what she exists for.

Pope John Paul II said "No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church, can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples."

That doesn't mean it will always be easy, but Christ shows us today that it doesn't have to be as difficult as we want to make it.

Jesus comes to a town where everyone is a member of what a good Jew recognized as a heretical sect and He sits down by a well. A woman comes to draw water. Israelites don't talk to Samaritans, much less accept a drink and men usually didn't make conversation with women at all in public. So this is a radical departure from the expected social norm.

Jesus recognizes, he "sees" her and affirms her by being willing to accept a drink from her.

*(This breaks some of our own norms - doesn't it?)*

*We rightly understand that we are to be generous, to be kind, to treat others well, yet how often do we refuse another's kindness, another's generosity. Someone does what we should be doing, and we shut it down out of pride or a sense that we might be obligated. Is it any*

*wonder that the world seems less kind?)*

Anyway, back to the story:

Because a kindness was offered and accepted, **a dialogue begins**. It starts out about water, wells, Jews and Samaritans, but Jesus asks her questions that throw her off a bit and make her think. He finally asks a question that leads her to “fess up” and admit her deepest need. As thirsty as Jesus was, she thirsts for love, and has run through quite a few partners looking for the real thing.

She sees in Jesus that his is the love she’s been looking for. It’s not carnal. It’s a love in Spirit and in Truth. She abandons her water jar, and symbolically along with it, all of her past and she runs to town to tell everyone about Jesus.

Did she wait till she had a master’s degree in theology? Did she sit down with the people and demonstrate from Scripture why he was the Messiah? No. She simply **told people**, with joy, confidence, and conviction, what Jesus had done for her. And she **invited people** to come and experience him for themselves.

And that’s how a large portion of that town came to believe. That’s how a large portion of the Roman Empire came to believe.

Christians simply listened to neighbors and co-workers with respect and love. They asked questions to find out their needs, and told them how Jesus had met similar needs in their lives. And then an invitation was issued to come check it out.

Pope Francis tells us: “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter,”

I think what he means is that Christians should appear not as people seeming solely to impose their beliefs, but as those (quote) “who wish to **share their joy**, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet.” (end quote)

One of our more meaningful Lenten resolutions this year ought to be to pray and work toward getting over our fear of sharing the good news, to be aware of the spiritual needs of those around us, to joyfully share Our Lord’s love, to share, as St. Paul says: “the hope that does not disappoint” and, while we’re at it, invite them to Church. Jesus tells us today “The fields are ripe for harvest.”