

“Unraveled Shame”
John 4:1-29

One of the great symbols of our country is the Statue of Liberty! It reminds us of the value of human life, especially of those who are hurting. One of the most inspirational pieces about the statue is the poem by Emma Lazarus that is affixed to the base of the statue. Emma was asked to write a poem to help with a fundraiser for the cost of the base of the statue. She reluctantly wrote “The New Colossus” poem. It has inspired many generations about the ideals of liberty and welcome of all human beings, especially those who are oppressed. Here is the full poem:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

What an incredible vision of welcome of all people, especially those who are seen as unworthy! This poem has helped countless people who felt worthless and rejected. The poem comes to mind in connection to the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman according to John 4. This is a story about someone who was victimized based on her ethnicity, gender, and religion. From the beginning of the story, we are told about the things that make this person unworthy of Jesus’ time and attention: “A Samaritan Woman.” She already had three strikes against her. In “normal” circumstances, Jesus should have had nothing to do with her. This woman would have been considered by Jesus as an enemy and thus should have been shunned or at least ignored by him. The Samaritans were considered resident aliens in the land and represented to the Jews the accommodation and compromise of the Jews, who during the time of Exile married foreigners and followed the religions of other nations. There were so many differences and disagreements between the Jews and the Samaritans that Jesus couldn’t have picked a worse enemy of his people to ask water from. But that is how God’s grace works. It does not depend on our status, gender, ethnicities, cultures, or actions. Nothing we can do or be can take away our worthiness in God’s eyes. In fact, it is the opposite of what we think. When we really mess up or are mistreated by society, that is when God’s compassion is the greatest for us. Just like when the parents of a sick child will do

anything to help them, God's mercy and love are most evident and accessible when we are hurting, when life unravels.

Jesus had compassion for her circumstances of having to depend on several men for her daily existence. Jesus saw through her plight and had compassion. What Jesus saw in her was the image of God and not all the degrading labels of society. He offered her the gift of the living water of life. She was thirsty for that kind of acceptance. She was degraded for most of her life, and so the words and compassion of Jesus must have felt so refreshing. She had not seen the potential for her life because others made her to feel inferior. But with the unconditional acceptance of Jesus, she became an apostle for the message of Jesus to her people. She went back and told her people about Jesus and that they had to come and encounter him themselves. The woman had to cross several boundaries of ethnicity, religion, gender, and culture to see God's presence in her life. All of this was possible because she had that encounter with Christ. It was her direct experience of seeing herself through his eyes that moved her beyond all of her limitations and shame to discover her true worth. The Samaritan woman is an example of faith, seeing, and God's inclusive love. Her life is changed as she encountered Jesus, the light of the world.

One of our basic human needs is to be mirrored and affirmed! Unfortunately, most of our human mirrors reflect back to us imperfectly and with many filters and blemishes. Even when we have great parents, we may get the message that we are not enough from TV, school mates, or other family members. Somewhere along the path, our own mirrors get blurry and stop seeing our own beauty and worth as God sees us. The challenge is to always find ways to allow God to mirror back to us our divine nature. We need these divine encounters by the well! We need to drink daily of the living waters of life. The world will reflect illusions to us about race, gender, status, beauty, power, security, wealth, and relationships. But in order to see ourselves and others as God see us and them, we have to be soaked each day by the water of life.

This evening, I invite you to take a few moments. Imagine yourself being seen through the eyes of Jesus, the one who saw the Samaritan woman with so much compassion and grace. Listen to some words from Maria Gullo with an affirmation of your worthiness before God. "Greater than the sun that warms and lights the earth by day and the radiant moon by night, are you. Lovelier than the stars that pierce the midnight heavens, are you. Braver than all creatures that run the earth or touch the sky, are you. Stronger than the tallest oak tree that can withstand the storms of a thousand years, are you. More glorious than the vast oceans whose mighty waves break in perfect time to gently meet the shore, are you. All this is true of you, not because of what you have done or what you have failed to do, not for where you were born or who bore you, not for the wealth you have accumulated or lost, not for riches, poverty, status or lack of.

You are the beloved because you were loved since before your time on earth existed. Because you hold more glory in your being than all the galaxies put together. Because one drop of your blood, one tear that falls from your eye, one breath that moves effortlessly through your lungs, one beat of your heart is beyond brilliant. Because every

hair on your head, every cell that makes up the universe within you, is the greatest miracle. You are the beloved because the Most High God, who is Love, pours into you without measure, has placed the Holiest Spirit within your soul, the Spirit of wisdom and creation, of Incarnation and Resurrection. Allow the false notion that you are anything less, to disintegrate into non-existence. For all has already been done for you and in you. Now it is time for you to accept your identity and set forth the course of your True Self. The Christ presence within. Soften your heart, redirect your mind, open your soul to this transforming truth within that you are the beloved of the Most High God. Receive, believe and live.” Amen.