

## *God Loves Backwards*

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3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Lent A  
March 4, 2018

In 2002 Pope John Paul II came to Toronto for World Youth Day. As part of World Youth Day, the bishops from around the world hold catechetical sessions for the youth. Cardinal Dolan from New York was one of the bishops giving a catechetical session to about 200 English-speaking youth. During his session, he said, you know I've been talking this whole time, would any of you like to share how WYD has impacted you?

A girl in the back of the room raised her hand and said, "World Youth Day has saved my life." She proceeded to tell her story of how she had been living on the streets of Detroit from the age of 14. She was now 22. She became a drug addict and to support her habit fell into a life of prostitution. There was an enormous feeling of pain, emptiness, and shame that filled her life and it led her to wander into a Catholic Church. She was thirsting for something more. It was there for this first time that she found genuine companionship. She met people who cared about her and didn't want to use her.

She said, "Here at World Youth Day, I've met a man who told me he loved me." Now, she said, "I've had a lot of old men tell me they loved me," but this one really means it. And this old man also told me God loves me and he loves me so much he wants me to spend eternity with me."

She said, "This old man has given me hope." "I'm no longer thinking of returning to former way of life." "I'm no longer thinking of harming myself." "He's saved my life." The old man she was referring to, of course, was referring to was Pope John Paul II.

Jesus is thirsty! And you know what he's thirsty for? Not the water in the well. He is thirsting for sinners. He thirsted for that woman at World Youth Day. He thirsted for the woman at the well, and he thirsts for you and me. The first step of accepting Jesus as our savior is to acknowledge, "Lord, I'm a sinner and I need to be saved."

How do we know that the Samaritan woman in the gospel is a notorious sinner? The gospel says it was noon. In biblical times, women would go to the well early in the morning at the cool part of the day. But this woman is there at noon, in the heat of the day. And she's alone. Notice how sin isolates us and separates us from the community.

Jesus says to the woman, "Give me a drink." St. Augustine so beautifully said that Jesus is not thirsting for water; he is thirsting for her faith. He's thirsting for her love. This is the paradox: Jesus thirsts for her in the midst of her sin!

Vinny Flynn wrote a book called *The 7 Secrets of Divine Mercy*. In the book he says God loves backwards! What does he mean? Most of us learn that love has to be earned. We are rewarded for good behavior and punished for bad behavior. Even Santa Claus is

checking up on us to see whether we've been naughty or nice. If you're good, you get good things, if you're bad, all you get is," a lump of coal." (p. 115) From the time we started Kindergarten, we learn that if we're good we get gold stars! We learn that love is conditional . . . conditioned on our behavior.

We can easily begin thinking, "This must be the way God love us." I have to measure up! God will only love me if I do everything right.

This is one of my favorite passages from Fr. Michael's book **33 Days to Merciful Love**: Listen, "God doesn't love us because we're so good but because he's so good." (p. 53) God doesn't love us because "we deserve it but because we desperately need it." (p. 53) "God's ways are not our ways!" God "isn't attracted to our gifts, virtues, and talents, but rather, to our weakness, brokenness and sin." (p. 53) This is what Vinny Flynn means when he says, "God loves backwards." We love virtuous, nice people. But Jesus is attracted to wounded, broken people.

What does the devil want us to believe? I'm not worthy. I'm no good. Do you know the difference between guilt and shame? Guilt is how I feel when I do something bad. Shame is the feeling that I'm bad.

When we give into those feelings of shame, thinking we're worthless, what do we do? We immerse ourselves in the world trying to numb our senses. We self-medicate. We drink too much, we eat too much. We think shopping will make us feel better. We turn to pornography. We spend hours on social media posting pictures trying to convince everyone that our lives are really great! The well in the gospel represents all the ways that we try to fill the emptiness in our hearts. And Jesus is saying, "STOP!" I love you. I can quench your thirst. I can give you living water that will well up within you to eternal life.

One of my favorite lines in the gospel is when the Samaritan Woman says, "Come meet a man who told me everything I've done." What's the implication? Jesus knows all my deepest darkest secrets and he still loves me! One beautiful way we experience this is confession. It's a healing moment when we bring our woundedness to the light of Jesus and we can say, Jesus knows everything I've done, and we hear those words, "you're forgiven."

Encountering divine love, leads to conversion. Did you notice at the end of the gospel the woman left her water jar behind? She was no longer going to draw water from the well that couldn't satisfy.

Jesus is thirsting for us. This Lent let's ask the Lord to awaken our thirst for him. Where those two thirsts meet, we find joy.