

HOMILY ~ THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT MARCH 11-12, 2023

Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavioral science and a researcher at the University of Chicago Booth School of business, was doing research on conversations. He was studying the difference between shallow and meaningful conversations between strangers. He studied 1,800 people as they went through 12 different conversational experiences. He found that even short, meaningful conversations with strangers improve our sense of well being and make us feel more connected with others in general.

He also found that people overestimate how awkward it would be to hold a meaningful conversation with someone they do not know well. He also found that we underestimate how other people want to have meaningful conversations with us. That is probably why we tend to avoid conversations with strangers; and when we do have those conversations, we tend to keep them very superficial. However, the research shows that we would be better off if we had more of those meaningful conversations with people we do not know well. I think during COVID, we all had our little pod of people that we were in contact with. We also learned to avoid people that we do not know well. I think there is a lot of that left over, and I think we need to push ourselves to have those meaningful conversations with people we do not know well.

I always look to Jesus for his example on how we are called to behave, and I think he gives us a great example in the Gospel Reading today. The Jews and the Samaritans had been bitter enemies for generations, and Jews would take the long way around Samaria to get to Jerusalem just to avoid the Samaritans. Jesus was purposely traveling through Samaria. Secondly, Jesus was speaking to a woman in public at the well. Jewish men frequently did not speak to their own wives in public. When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman, she was an enemy; and he was totally breaking the cultural norms at the time. I do not think this conversation between strangers could have been more uncomfortable, but that is what Jesus did. The woman was at the well to draw water and carry it back to her home at noon, in the heat of the day. Women came to draw water in the morning before it got really hot. This woman was at the well in the middle of the day purposely so she could avoid contact with other women. She had been married to five different men and was not married to the man she was living with. She was probably judged by the women in the area and wanted to avoid the contact. Jesus knew this, but he did not

judge her. We do not know exactly why she was in this situation, but my guess is that she was abused by men for many years. At that time, women had a hard time surviving without a man to take care of her. She may have just been doing what she needed to do to survive. Jesus has a meaningful conversation with her and reveals to her that he is the Messiah. Jesus rarely tells anyone that he is the Messiah, but he told the woman. And the woman had a conversion. Why was she so easily converted? I think Jesus may have been the first man in years that treated her with dignity and respect. The woman was no longer trying to avoid others, she was out evangelizing. Jesus picked her to evangelize. Jesus is always more interested in our future than our past.

Our theme for Lent this year is *"Connect With Us."* As we move out of COVID, I think we need to move out of our little pod of people that we are comfortable associating with. People in our pod probably think the same as we do. We need to have many more meaningful associations with others beyond that small group of people to get some diversity in our lives. These meaningful conversations with people we do not know well improve our sense of well being and our sense of connection with others in general. Don't you think we need this more than ever with all of the divisions in our world? Church is the perfect safe place to do this. If you are not coming to Mass regularly now, I suggest you make a commitment to come every week. If you come to Mass regularly and leave right after, I suggest that you stay and go to coffee and donuts, Saturday night snacks, the spaghetti dinner or pizza night and have a conversation with someone you do not know very well. Sit with someone you do not know or invite someone you do not know to your table. Research shows that it will not be near as uncomfortable as you think, and my guess is you will really enjoy it. If you are only here on the weekend, I suggest you come to the fish fry, a soup supper or one of the other activities we have going during the week. Whatever your involvement with St. Edith is at this time, take the next step to get a little more connected.

Love and Peace,

Fr. Jim