

Francis' embrace
Third Sunday of Lent
John 4: 5-42
March 23, 2014

Jesus meets the woman at
Jacob's well

It was one of the most difficult
photographs to look at - yet it
melted the hearts of all who
saw it.

Vinicio Riva suffers from
neurofibromatosis, a non-
infectious genetic, painful and
disfiguring disease.

Riva is completely covered
from head to toe with ulcerous
swellings and bleeding, itchy
tumors.

Riva, 53, works running
errands and doing odd jobs at
a home for the elderly and
chronically ill in the town of
Vincenza, Italy.

Last November, Riva was part
of a group that traveled to

Rome for a morning public audience with Pope Francis.

Because he cannot stay on his feet for long, Riva was seated in a wheelchair.

To the group's surprise, the Swiss Guard ushered them to the front.

When Pope Francis saw Vinicio, he embraced the poor man and kissed his head.

Vinicio, accustomed to stares and shock and fear, was confused at first by Pope Francis' lack of hesitation to embrace him.

"He didn't have any fear of my illness," Vinicio said later.

"He embraced me without speaking.

I quivered. I felt great warmth."

The entire encounter lasted a little more than a minute, but

Vinicio's life has been transformed.

He experienced a sense of acceptance and blessing he seldom receives.

And the photograph had a similar effect on all who saw it.

A similar encounter takes place in today's Gospel.

While the woman at the well is not physically disfigured, in the eyes of her community she is internally "disfigured."

Her lifestyle, considered sinful and godless, has made her a pariah or outcast in her community.

But by simply acknowledging her, speaking to her, asking for a simple drink of water from her, Jesus shatters the taboo that isolates her from God and her community and lifts her up to dignity and hope - just as

Pope Francis does for the disfigured Vinicio.

In today's Gospel, Jesus prods the woman at the well to face the reality of her life: the messes she has made of her relationships, the sin that has estranged her from her own people.

Facing up to that reality, she is able to respond to God's forgiving love with wonder and joy.

All of us who have encountered Jesus are called to be reconcilers, not judges; we are called to lift people up, not drive them to their knees.

In so many ordinary ways we can help one another realize new life and hope in Christ if we are willing
*to tear down the walls that divide us,

*to reach over the distances
between us,
*to build bridges over chasms
of mistrust and prejudice.

On this Third Week of Lent-the
mid-way point, the grace to
start over again is ours if we
are honest enough and wise
enough to realize God's
constant presence and
invitation to return to him.

In so many ordinary ways we
can bring forth new life and
hope in Christ

*if we focus on living rather
than existing, * on love rather
than power,
* on healing rather than
rending,
and on rebuilding rather than
breaking down another's
spirit..

Lenten Tip: As a Lenten God
Reminder: If you have a smart
phone set 2 alarms during the

day and say a short prayer such as the Our Father or Hail Mary to remind you of God's Presence.

Stuff you need to Know" Some thoughts shared by Connections of MediaWorks, 7 Lantern Lane, Londonderry, N.H and of course some by myself through the power of the Holy Spirit