

One of the most well-known advocates for the hearing impaired was a remarkable woman named, Helen Keller. Helen was born Alabama in the 1880. She was left both deaf and blind after contracting meningitis when she was only 19 months old.

Since she had lost her hearing at such a young age, she also lost her ability to imitate sounds and therefore her ability to learn speech.

Despite this tremendous handicap she became the first deaf-blind person to earn a college degree and she later went on to become a world-famous speaker and author.

She is remembered as an advocate for people with disabilities, especially the deaf-blind. In 1915 she founded the Helen Keller International (HKI) Organization, which is devoted to research in hearing, vision and speech.

Last fall I had the pleasure to meet a Deacon who is an audiologist and he shared that, years ago he worked with the Hellen Keller Institute in New York on developing more effective methods to teach speech to young students who were both deaf and blind.

It turns out that many of these deaf-blind students have a highly developed sense of touch. He was honored to have working on developing one of the first tactile hearing and speech devices.

Their students would actually feel the sounds. And with the help of their teachers, they would actually learn to hear and speak through their sense to touch.

Today the Helen Keller Institute is one of the most prestigious schools for the deaf-blind in the world.

Despite her tremendous handicap, Helen Keller was able to achieve many great things. The story of her achievement dates back to a spring day in 1887 when a 20-year-old woman named Annie Sullivan came to Alabama to be Helen's private teacher.

Annie's first big step in developing communication with little Helen came several weeks after her arrival... Helen described it in her autobiography.

She wrote, "My teacher brought me my hat, and I knew that I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought made me hop and skip with pleasure."

"We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout."

As the cool water gushed over one hand, she spelled the word water with her finger on the palm of my other hand. I stood still with my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers.

Suddenly the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew that W-A-T-E-R meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy and set it free.

Helen's experience at the well that day changed her life forever. The story of Helen Keller at the well bears a striking resemblance to the story in today's gospel. It too took place at a well.

It too involved a teacher and a student. In it the teacher used water to communicate an important message to the student. And that message changed the life of the student forever.

As in the case of Helen Keller, it lifted the Samaritan woman out of a world of darkness and opened to her a world of light. Like the life of Helen Keller, the Samaritan woman's life was changed forever.

In the early days of Christianity, the Samaritan woman became a popular image of catechumens. Those were the adults learning to be Christians and preparing for the Sacrament of Baptism at the Easter Vigil.

They too would soon meet Jesus at a well. Water would also play an important part in that meeting. Their lives too would be changed forever.

In our parish on the Vigil of Easter, our catechumens will be gathering around a well. And, as in the case of the Samaritan woman and Helen Keller, the water in that well will change them forever. Likewise, on the Vigil of Easter, we will gather around the same well to renew our baptismal vows.

It's important to remember what the Samaritan woman did after her encounter with Jesus at the well. She left her water jar and went down into the town and said to the people,

"Came and see the man who told me everything that I have done."
And the people left the town and went out to meet Jesus.

And so the Samaritan woman, a sinner herself, became the first Christian missionary. After her encounter with Jesus at the well she went out to share the good news about him with her neighbors and friends.

We too should respond to our encounter with Jesus at the well of baptism the way the Samaritan woman did.
We too should do what Helen Keller did.
We too should share with others the new life that our teacher made possible for us.

Of the 70 million Catholics in the United States, almost half are inactive. And only 30% of Americans who are raised Catholic will remain Catholic into adulthood.

Statistics show that two-thirds of all Catholics who eventually return to the church do so because a friend or a relative invited them to return. Statistics also show that the very best recruiters of inactive Catholics are Catholics who themselves were once inactive.

This is an area of missionary work in which every Catholic in this church today can and should be involved. We all know Catholics who, through our Lenten sacrifices and loving invitation, might find their way back to the Church again.

Jesus assures us that there is more joy among the angels and saints in heaven over one person who has strayed from the fold and returned than over a hundred persons who have no need for repentance.

This is our calling as baptized and confirmed Catholic Christians – We are each called to be for our world what Jesus was for his world.

This is the Good News that Jesus invites us to take to heart today and implement in our lives.

This is the Good News that our world is desperately hungry to hear and longing to see lived out by every one of us in our everyday lives.

Friends, we can prove that we love Jesus *only* by loving others.
Love is the greatest privilege in the world,
But, it brings with it, the greatest responsibility.

Loving Jesus is our highest calling and it brings us our greatest good, but along with it comes the responsibility of discipleship, the responsibility of answering the call, to "*Follow me.*"

When we follow him, we hear what he says and we do what he does.
We live in his love when we show forth his compassion,
and when we are his witnesses in our world.

To live in his love is to live the sacramental life
– to be a visible sign of God’s invisible grace –
to manifest God, to make him present
wherever we are, and to whomever we meet.

Selfless, life-giving love makes God present because that is God’s nature, a nature we have learned about in detail through Jesus. All of us here today have inherited the missionary call of Christ.

Evangelization belongs to the very nature of the Church, so to be a Catholic Christian is to join with the all of the saints through the ages and announce the Good News.

The Eucharist we celebrate here supports us in our gospel call.

When we leave here today we will never be the same
because today we are, personally and communally, washed clean.

We are renewed in God’s Word and
strengthened through his Sacrament; and then
we are sent out, like the Samaritan woman,
to be what we are called to be
– a visible sign of God’s invisible grace.