

“Well, Well, Well”

It is precious and all too rare to be with someone who really knows you and who accepts you for who you are. I remember vividly the evening in 1973 when my mother committed suicide in Chicago. I was in Connecticut and living alone at the time; but I didn't want to be alone that night. I called up my friend Mike, told him what had happened and asked if I could stay at his house before flying out the next morning to be with my family in Chicago. He said Yes.

You know how these things are. Nobody knows what to do or say, as though we think the right words could make everything all right, if only we knew what they were. When I got to Mike's house, he was sprawled out on the sofa watching TV. I had spent enough time there with him and his family that I was right at home. I just walked in and sat down. He didn't get up, he didn't say anything except Hi, he didn't make any sort of a fuss at all, really. He just treated me exactly like me, as if to say, “Welcome home.” And that was exactly what I needed at that moment—just to feel safe and to gather myself. It is a precious thing to be with someone who really knows you and who accepts you for who you are.

The life of faith is filled with paradox. We grow up by becoming as little children. We find our lives by losing them; it's when we try to hold onto them that they slip away from us. We become our deepest and truest selves by giving ourselves away. And we find the strength and courage to change when we accept ourselves as we are. The journey begins not where we wish we were, but where we truly are. Acceptance is transformational. Facing reality opens a world of possibility.

It is a precious thing to be with someone who truly knows you and who accepts you for who you are. This is the gift that Jesus gives to the Samaritan woman at the well. It is also the gift we are called to give to one another and to the world.

If this story from John seems a bit strange to us, it was all the more so in Jesus' world. Jesus and his group are on the move. They have been traveling through Judea, in the southern part of Israel. They decide to head back north to Galilee. In between lies Samaria. John writes that Jesus “had to go through Samaria.” In point of fact, travelers routinely went far out of their way precisely to *avoid* going through Samaria. But avoidance is hardly a part of Jesus' agenda.¹

“Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans” is the way John puts it. But this is too delicate. There was severe animosity between Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans thought of themselves as direct descendants of the two northern tribes of Israel. But the Jews saw them as a mixed population imported by the Assyrians after the northern kingdom was conquered and essentially disappeared in 721 BCE. The Samaritans wanted to be regarded as Israelites, even though they had developed customs,

¹ Fred Craddock provocatively suggests that the necessity of Jesus going through Samaria is theological, not geographical! See the *Harper's Bible Commentary*, p.1053.

traditions and forms of worship very different from Judaism as it existed in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Neither side favored dealings with the other; but the Jews especially looked on the Samaritans with contempt. So Jewish travelers went around Samaria to avoid contaminating contact.²

If you're beginning to sense that Jesus' trip to Samaria is a scandal, you're right. But we're just getting started. Jesus and the disciples approach the town of Sychar at high noon. On the outskirts is a well, long identified with Jacob, who lived more than 1500 years earlier. Jesus, weary from his journey, sits down by the well while the disciples go into town to scrounge up some food.

Along comes a Samaritan woman, whose presence raises two new issues. First of all, men did not speak to women to whom they were not related—the fear, of course, being that conversation might lead to dancing. And secondly, this woman may be a social outcast. We suspect this because the well was a place where women would gather to socialize. But respectable people would not draw water in the heat of the day: only mad dogs, Englishmen and social misfits go out in the noonday sun. So this person is a Samaritan, a woman, and socially suspect: three strikes.

Jesus gives no credence whatsoever to these social and theological barriers. He addresses the woman in the full expectation that she has something valuable to share with him, and he says to her, "Give me a drink." Asking to drink from her bucket is a strangely intimate request from somebody fearful of contamination. "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" She's right to be suspicious. This guy might have a hole in his bucket.

Jesus replies in a way that lets her know that she is right to suspect that there is more going on than meets the eye. "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

I love her response: "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep." Listen, buddy, I don't care who you are. You could be Jacob himself for all I care, you've got no bucket! This woman has chutzpah! She reminds me of the stewardess who once asked Mohammad Ali to fasten his seatbelt. He was in one of his playful moods, and he said to her, "Superman don't need no seatbelt!" She looked at him coolly and said, "Superman don't need no *airplane*!" He smiled and fastened his seatbelt.

Well, it may be true that Jesus does not have a bucket, but he does not need a well! Last week we had a reference to baptism when Nicodemus was told he had to be born of water and Spirit. Here comes another with Jesus' reference to "living water." Living water is the kind of fresh, moving water in which many early Christians were baptized. But it is also spiritual water. Jesus tells her that this kind of water quenches the thirst of the weary soul: "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." She wants some living water, she thinks; but she responds only on the literal level: "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

² For more about "Samaritans" than you may care to know, see the article on them in the multi-volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Jesus does give her living water, but the spiritual kind. He appears to be changing the subject, but what he does is deepen the conversation to let her know that he knows her through and through. “Go, call your husband, and come back,” he says, touching right on the most vulnerable part of who she is and giving her a powerful choice: she can go on with the verbal sparring, or she can risk the truth, hoping that this stranger is not crazy. She at first just dips her toe in the living water. “I have no husband,” she says, waiting to see where this thing will go. Jesus rewards her honesty by revealing that he knows her story, the five husbands and the guy she’s living with now. And that breaks the thing wide open.

Let’s be careful here: even if Jesus knows her whole story, we don’t. We don’t know all the circumstances surrounding the multiple marriages, or even whether she’s been widowed or divorced. When a woman was widowed and her husband had brothers who were unmarried, it was the custom for the next oldest brother to marry the widow. It is altogether possible that she has gone through five brothers, and that a sixth refused to marry her. She may have had a string of misfortune, or she and others may think she’s cursed; but she isn’t necessarily immoral. That’s a view later commentators have imposed on the story.³

Whatever the case, now she knows that Jesus doesn’t care about her past. But what about the theological stuff that separates Jews and Samaritans? Won’t he condemn her for that? “Sir,” she ventures, “I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” If you’re going to accept me for who I am, what about my being a Samaritan? Jesus tells her that it’s time to move past all that stuff. “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.” It isn’t the pedigree of your piety, it’s the depth of your devotion.

This is too good to be true. This is the sort of transformation that seems eschatological, that will be possible only at the end of history, when the Messiah comes. You see? She’s really catching on! Jesus looks her in the eye and says, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” No social barriers to God; no theological barriers to God: she melts. And the living water of joy bubbles up inside her so that she has to go and tell somebody, anybody, everybody!

The disciples interrupt the conversation, but not without noting to themselves how inappropriate it is and registering silent disapproval. She leaves her jar there by the well and she runs. “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” That’s a slight exaggeration, perhaps, but five husbands would keep a person pretty busy; there wasn’t a lot left over, I’ll wager. But what she’s really saying is, “Come and meet a person who knows me through and through and who accepts me as I am. Come and see somebody who lets me know that God loves me.” It is a rare and precious thing to be with someone who really knows you and who accepts you for who you are.

³ Commentator Gail O’Day is very helpful on this point. See *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996, p. 567.

In fact, it is transformational; and the woman is transformed. Because she has been known, she looks again at the one who knows her. As the psalmist wrote, “O LORD, thou hast searched me and known me...”(Psalm 139:1) Or the Apostle Paul: “then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”(I Corinthians 13:12) She is changed and so runs to tell the others. They hear a new word from her, and so they are transformed, as well. And at the well all is made well: well, well, well.

That’s the way Jesus is, inviting us into that intimacy and honesty of relationship, even though we don’t think of ourselves as part of the preferred group or the proper theological enclave, and even though we may harbor some deep, dark secret that we’re certain would render us unacceptable. “Come and see somebody who knows everything you ever did,” and who doesn’t bat an eye. That’s who Jesus is.

And it’s also what we’re called to be, those of us who are followers of Jesus, who want to be like him. We’re called to be people who reach out to the outcasts, who break bread and rub shoulders with those of different faiths and no faith at all, who begin by taking seriously the gifts they have to give us. This is not the age-old posture of the missionary, regarding the “unwashed and unfortunate” of the world as candidates for elevation to our lofty status, be it social or theological. This is about meeting people where they are, coming to know them and touching them with a love and acceptance that is like unto that which we have received.

When we see those around us for who they really are: that’s when we experience the presence of God in our midst. That kind of love is transformational to us as individuals, and transformational to us as a community of faith. It is a rare and precious thing to be with someone who really knows you, and who accepts you for who you are.

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
(515) 255-3149

Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM

Fax: 515-255-8667

E-mail: druhe@plymouthchurch.com