

*Face-to-Face with Jesus: Hanging Out at the Local Watering Hole*

*John 4:5-42*

*February 24, 2008*

I've been reflecting recently on the kind of love that Jesus re-presents. Every once in awhile our lectionary cycle meshes up with what has been on my heart and this is one of those weeks. The story of the "woman at the well" from the gospel of John re-presents the best in what it means to love another person. I saw an amazing UTube video that is a modern-day representation of this favorite story. In a kind of rap cadence this young woman speaks to what the woman might have told Jesus if approached today. She kept saying over and over again, "to love you is to know you and to know you is to love you." How true that seems. To love and be loved is to have your life be absolutely transparent to another person. That for me is the essence of having a perfect partner. It is to know what that person looks like and sounds like and smells like when he or she wakes up in the morning. It is to know them at their best and their worst and to care for them anyway. It is to be with them when they are sick. It is to just to be with them. Some havesaid ministers know us at our best, lawyers at our worst and doctors just the way we are. But to be that vulnerable with another person can be scary and filled with risks as well. For many of us, to get the guts up to enter into that conversation with many people a little loosening up with a favorite adult beverage is the only way to get there.

So we head down to the nearest, local watering hole. Why do we go to the neighborhood watering hole? Many reasons, I guess. To find friendship...to find a

kind of intimacy among the masses while still staying a little detached. When we go to the local watering hole it is a place of truth and of falsehood. We go to celebrate, to console, to escape, and to just be who we are. When I used to go to the regular watering holes about town, most of the reasons weren't good ones. The behaviors needed modification, but there were legitimate reasons. When I was in corporate sales the local watering hole was where a lot of business transactions were first discussed and debated. They were safe places to have serious and light conversation. I had a couple of customers who really preferred to meet there. Ron was one of those customers. Over many years I had dozens of sales calls with Ron at the watering hole by his office. We did a lot of business but we also became good friends. We shared lots of personal stuff together. He saw me go through divorce and through job change. I saw his kids grow up, go to college and I saw he and his wife return to the empty nest stage. As I felt God's tug to go into the ministry I even shared my joys, aspirations and fears of a career change. He later would write one of my seminary recommendation letters. I don't know what he said in that letter and I am not sure I want to know. But I remember one vivid scene in which I shared my dream of being a minister. He looked at me seriously, with more than a bit of compassion, and raised his whiskey glass. I thought he was going to lift a toast to my dream. Instead his southern drawl become very slow and he said, "Of course Andy that would mean that you would have to give us this." Wow, Ron knew pretty much every thing I had ever done. To know is to love and to love is to know.

To know is to love. To love is to know. It's interesting how the woman at the well summed up her understanding of Jesus as the Anointed One in her statement,

“He told me everything I had ever done.” It is the intimate knowledge that Jesus tells her about herself that convinces her that Jesus is the real deal. There were significant barriers between Jesus, the man and rabbi, and this Samaritan woman. It was forbidden for rabbis to be alone with a woman, even if the woman was a family member. Even worse, no rabbi would be alone with a single woman. But the largest barrier that Jesus removes is the one that shocks the Samaritan woman – conversation between a Samaritan and a Jew. Samaria was the former northern kingdom of Israel. When Israel split into two kingdoms after the reign of Solomon, significant animosity began to rise between Judea and Samaria. When the Assyrians invaded Samaria and deported many of their natives, it was believed by Judea that the Samaritans sold out by intermarrying with the Assyrians, then the Babylonians and then the Persians. Later Judeans would also be deported to Babylon. But when the Persians allowed the Judeans to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem the Samaritans were shunned from participating. Later King Josiah tore down the alternative temple of Shiloh. The worst feelings were caused under Ezra and Nehemiah when Jews took the ultimate Zionist position by forcing divorces from intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews like Samaritans. Although they both believed in Yahweh and Mosaic Law, there were religious differences in the Bible they read and the holy places. Samaritans like this woman worshipped on Mt. Gerazim, which was believed to be the cradle of God’s world. Jerusalem was at the center of the Jewish world. This is the first time that Jesus and the disciples on their route between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north don’t go around the territory of Samaria to avoid the hated Samaritans. Jesus takes huge risks and breaks down barriers to

speak with and get to know this woman. William Barclay believes their conversation to go well beyond what we have in the text, kind of a Dr. Phil conversation as Jesus extends the secrets of his teaching and kingdom to this humble woman who would have been off-limits to the ruling authorities of Israel.

I think of how members of the GLBT community ministered to the earliest sufferers of HIV/AIDS. Surrounded by fear without the necessary healthcare and social services available to those infected in the early stages of the disease it was the GLBT community that showed everyone else how to be merciful and meet those suffering just where they were. In a phrase, to know is to love and to love is to know.

This story in John is one of the most powerful for me in all of Scripture. It summarizes everything I know of the spiritual life. It asserts that God finds us just as we are, in spite of and in the midst of our sin. It asserts that God is not confined in church but is here and everywhere. It asserts that God loves the unlovable and will break down any human barrier to bring us back to God. It asserts that God knows us even in our darkest places (not like Santa Claus) but as one who woos us to get real, honest and speak the truth about all of our lives. But God doesn't leave us there. We leave as changed people – leaving our old patterns behind – dropping our old vessels like the Samaritan woman drops her water vessel – so that we can return to the people in our lives and witness to our faith. It calls us to get out of our comfort zones, to take risks, put away our old assumptions of what separates us from each other and really live the two great commandments of loving God and

neighbor. It is the essence of agape love for to be known is to be loved; to be loved is to be known. When we feel most unlovable it is not to be hated but to be ignored, to be invisible and looked over. But Jesus comes into enemy territory and dares to love.

He knew everything she had done and still loved her. Back when I was first getting sober I was required to write down all the sordid details of my drinking career – the stupid things I had done and the people I had hurt. It was one of the hardest things I had ever done. I remember meeting with my sponsor in a chapel and reading that list. He looked me right in the eye the entire time with no judgment. His face was filled with compassion. There was not the faintest sign of judgment or disapproval. Something like scales was lifted from my eyes. Although I had cried those heavy sobbing tears I felt my entire sinus cavity clear and I could smell and see and hear with a clarity I could not remember. He quite literally knew everything I had done and still cared for me. Truly amazing. And I remember at about that time that God removed my temptation to drink.

Is there anyone in your life where you can honestly say, “She/he knows everything I have ever done.” Do you know anyone with that level of honesty and intimacy? Susie had a crazy kind of love for Jerry. They were so close. But Susie contracted a strange virus and at a very young age became totally blind. She retreated into self-pity and depression. Over many months she dealt with her limitations and with Jerry’s support returned to her work. Each day Jerry would drive her to work across town from his office and then come back and pick her up at

the end of the day. This arrangement wasn't working for Jerry who had a desk job with the military. He told Susie, "Honey, let's work to get you used to taking the bus for work each day." She complained that she couldn't do it and that he obviously didn't love her. But soon she relented through his gentle love to this practical change. For weeks he would ride with her, teaching her to memorize her steps on to and off the bus, and then the short walk to her office. He counted out the change that she would pay the bus driver. After weeks of his close, loving presence she was ready to do it. Day after day she got used to this routine. After several weeks of going alone, she felt very lonely as she prepared to get off the bus one morning. The bus driver spoke to her one morning for the first time and she was startled. He said, "You must be the luckiest woman in the world." Susie felt insulted and patronized by his comment. But she restrained herself and respectfully replied, "How do you say that when you see my limitations?" The driver said, "Simple. Every morning I see as you get off the bus for work this handsome guy in a military uniform watch you get off the bus at a distance and salute you and blow you an affectionate kiss. He watches you get off the bus and walk to your office. Only then does he slowly turn and head back to his car."

Are you Jerry to anyone? Do you know and love anyone in that way. You know, God loves you in that way. God really does. To know is to love and to love is to know. God in the mystery of God's being knows every thing you have ever done and loves you. I invite you to surrender to this awesome reality that the lover of your soul brings to you in our gospel message today.

