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BEING KNOWN
Sermon for Lent 3A—Jn 4:5-42
LPC, 3/23/14

When getting together a group of people who are going to have to work closely with one another, it's usual practice to use a so-called "ice breaker." A common ice breaker is to have each person share something about himself or herself that no one else knows.

Because I have served on so many church groups over the years, I am running out of things that no one else knows. I was trying to think of something to share with you that you don't already know about me, and the best I can come up with this morning is that I like the purple gum drops best.

Oh, there are other things you don't know about me, obviously, that I don't care to share publicly. We all have things like that. It's only the folks closest to us who know our secrets. On the other hand, not sharing our secrets with *anybody* is rather a dangerous thing to do. A person who is alone with his or her secrets tends at some level to be an unhappy person.

We have been talking this Lent about unhappiness, and how we can make this Lent an opportunity to divest of unhappiness, or at least to involve God in the redemption of our own unhappiness. Having secrets is one cause of unhappiness.

If people who are alone with their secrets are unhappy, it follows that human beings, to be happy, need someone with whom to share their secrets. At some level we have to be *known* by someone, and not only known, but accepted and loved in truth..

To protect ourselves we can't be completely open with everyone. There are too many people out there who might take advantage of our vulnerabilities. But if there's no one who knows us in truth, we are lonely indeed. Plus, it's too easy to fool ourselves and not see things truly, if there's no one who knows our weaknesses well enough to help keep us honest.

All of us have a deep need to be known, and to be loved as we truly are. Anything less leads to unhappiness.

Let's apply these insights to the Samaritan woman at the well, with whom Jesus has the lengthy conversation we heard described this morning. Jesus, meeting this woman for the first time, seems to know a lot about her. She's been married five times and is now living with a man without benefit of clergy.

Now, even Elizabeth Taylor came under criticism for her multiple marriages. But Elizabeth Taylor was beautiful, and talented, and accomplished, and wealthy, and popular. Most importantly, she was also a twentieth-century woman. She could marry (and divorce) whom she chose.

We know nothing about this Samaritan woman's appearance or talents. But if she were wealthy she wouldn't be drawing her own water, and if she were popular, she'd be coming to the well in the company of other women. Most importantly, she was a first-century woman. She was likely married those five times without being consulted. And she most certainly couldn't divorce. This woman's been passed around like so much chattel. Given her history, it's unlikely anyone has taken the time to know her as she is. She has likely been overlooked and depersonalized all her life.

And here, of all people, is a Jew, a male, a scion of her own people's ancestral rivals, and he takes the time. He knows her and accepts her, and it breaks open her heart. She has been thirsting all her life to be truly known, and finally she is. But that's not all. Jesus offers her a glimpse of heaven. He tells her of eternal life, hers for the asking. No wonder she's so excited she goes and tells all her neighbors.

It's interesting that this story closely follows the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a learned man, a righteous and respected teacher of Israel, and he didn't understand what Jesus said at all, at least not at first. And here is this unlettered woman, a dirty Samaritan, a sinner, and she gets almost at once what Jesus is saying. We see again and again that the humblest and most needy are the first to see the value of what Jesus offers.

Maybe that's because when you are humble and low you don't have anyone telling you how great you are, so you are less likely to be fooled into thinking you don't need anybody to know you truly.

The beauty of having a friend like Jesus, is that not only does he know you as you are and still love you, but that his knowledge of you will help you know yourself better. In the light of Jesus' regard, you can see some of those things you keep secret even from yourself: things that are standing in the way of you and your happiness. Things like guilt over stuff you've done. Things you don't like about yourself. Things you've never admitted to yourself, both good and bad. Secret desires that could actually be indicators of where God wants you to go and how God wants you to be.

When things like that that have been kept in darkness are turned toward the light of Jesus' love, they are transformed, they are "born of spirit."

Jesus will never treat a secret the way humans sometimes do, using it against you. Jesus does not want elicit a confession of wrongdoing or weakness so he can rap your knuckles or send you into solitary. Jesus, as we heard last week, did not come into the world to condemn but to save. The value of repentance is not so much to be appropriately punished but to be freed of our burdens.

The mission statement of many churches is "to know Christ and make him known." Before that can happen, I would say, we need to *be* known by Christ. So offer him a drink of water, let down your defenses and see what happens.