



Sermon

John 4:5-42
The Third Sunday in Lent
February 24, 2008
Historic St. George's UMC
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

The Well at the Bus Stop: Come and See

Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people: "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" John 4:28-29

Riding home from church on Sundays, I get to listen to Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* on the car radio. My favorite part of the program is Keillor's weekly stream of consciousness riff – *The News from Lake Wobegon* – hearing the latest dirt from the Chatterbox Café or what's up with Wally and Evelyn at the Side Track Tap, or Pastor Inqvist at Lake Wobegon Lutheran or Father Emil over at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, or who's bumping into who at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, where the sign at the entrance says, "If you can't get it at Ralph's you probably don't need it anyway."

Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon points to a couple of things about small town or Philly-style, tight-knit neighborhood life most of us know. One is that you can be reasonably sure everyone knows your history and the latest news about you BEFORE you do yourself. Second is that the latest news about someone is NOT the same as truly knowing them.

The woman at the well in the Gospel of John may be nameless to us, but you can bet everyone in town KNEW who she was. You can bet the neighborhood knew all the juicy details about her. You can be doubly sure her reputation preceded her wherever she went. Even while passing through alien territory as Jesus did the day he met her – among total strangers – it is not hard to imagine Jesus getting an ear full about her as he sat by Jacob's well, the Side Track Tap of Sychar. They knew everything she'd ever done. Everything!

Sometimes knowing "everything" about a person gives us an excuse to stop seeing them – in every sense of the word.

Being seen. What a powerful thing. To know that another person has truly seen you, understood you, received you for who you really are: that is pure grace. Being seen. Most of us would do anything to be seen like that.

Being seen is what a hungry baby wants when he cries for someone to hold and feed him. *Being seen* is what a tired four year old wants when she has a temper tantrum. *Being seen* is what the depressed teenager wants when he or she act out with drugs or alcohol. *Being seen* is what one lonely adult wants when he cruises porno sites after the family goes to bed, or she obsesses over her weight and working out.

We long for deep connection. We long to be recognized for who we are. We long to be noticed. We long for communion. When we don't have it, we waste away from isolation, anger, depression, addiction, abuse.

One of the lessons I've learned working with people in parish ministry and about myself struggling with my own issues (we ALL have our issues, don't we) is that people don't necessarily "choose" the problems, addictions or abuses that trip them up. What we choose is to somehow dull the pain or stir something new into the boredom or inadequacy we feel – dull the pain with drink, drugs, smoke, sex, risky behavior, flirtations with something to get a rush. These impulses make sense but the outcomes can be tragic. If somehow we could be truly seen, perhaps we might discover other, more safe and life-enhancing ways to deal with the pain.

Take the woman at the well. Look at what the gospel reading tells about her life: five husbands and another one she's not married to. Even if we don't jump to smutty

conclusions about why she had five husbands, she has a reputation that keeps her from going to the well at normal hours. She can't go to the well when all the respectable people go in the cool of the early morning or the breezy evening. She has to go at high noon.

Either she has the worst luck in history with husbands or she's a dead ringer for one of the at risk types we talked about a moment ago. She has learned some good coping skills – she can carry on a good conversation, about religion even. She can hold her own with a rabbi and even make a point here or there. She's smart.

But she cannot fool Jesus. He sees through the thick skin she's had to grow to survive. Like it says in the text, he sees everything she has ever done. He sees beyond it to. He sees everything she's ever tried to be. He sees everything she's had to do to survive. He sees everything she's ever dreamed she might be, if things had only been different. He sees her, in spite of her. He cares for her, in spite of it all. He acknowledges and accepts her as she is. It must have felt like heaven. It opened her eyes.

An amazing aside comes to me. Jesus talks to this woman at the well longer than any other conversation he has with anyone in all the gospels – longer than with any of his disciples, longer than defending himself against his accusers, longer than with any member of his family. She is the first person Jesus reveals himself to in the gospel of John. A woman. An outsider from Samaria. She is the first to guess Jesus is who he is. The first to tell others. The first evangelist. She says: "Come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah can he?"

Sometimes knowing "everything" about a person gives us an excuse to stop seeing them – in every sense of the word. *To be seen*. It feels miraculous to be seen, to be recognized for who you are, to believe that someone has really seen you.

The truth is that for most of us, being seen is a rare gift, and a demanding one. It means coming clean about our hurt and brokenness. It means being honest about what isn't working. It means, like we said on Ash Wednesday, no longer holding on to "the devil made me do it" excuse or the

litany of other excuses we hold on to. It means, telling the truth about "everything we've ever done." It means believing we are more than the sum of our accomplishments, our resumes, our deeds and misdeeds. It means we have the possibility of being, as Paul puts it to the Corinthians, "the new creation (in Christ): everything old has passed away, see everything has become new." (II Cor. 5:17)

Being seen means that we are known, accepted, acknowledged, loved and forgiven. It is pure grace and simply miraculous. And it can happen anywhere – at the village well, at the kitchen sink, in the school cafeteria, in front of the computer screen, reading a book, emptying the trash, laying in bed at night, driving the car with or without the aid of the radio, waiting at a traffic light, for a bus or train. Being seen can happen anywhere at all if we really look for it.

What would it be like for us to set out on errands today or while at work, school or the store this week, expecting Jesus to show up any minute? Not in some big life crisis, personal blizzard, big bang or flash of light when we'll clammer for him anyway. No, I mean Jesus showing up in all those Lake Wobegon-like people and places, the Clint and Clarence Bunsens at the garage, or the Kyle and Myrtle Krebsbachs at the Chatterbox or Luann at the beauty parlor or Art at the Bait & Night O Rest Motel. The people we run into every day, the ones whose names we know and whose stories we think we know. The ones familiar to us, so familiar we stopped paying attention.

I'm remembering a particular story Garrison Keillor told about a boy he went to school with in Lake Wobegon – Donny Hart. Donny came from a family who kept to themselves. It always seemed they were embarrassed about something. Donny was a big boy – too big for his age. There was something different about him. He was pleasant, more pleasant than any of the other 5th graders. And by the time Keillor was in the 5th grade it was about Donny's fourth time through.

Donny was slow. The butt of jokes. He was large enough to scare you but for all the teasing he took, Donny never hit back. Said Keillor: "I was told to be nice to him and eventually I enjoyed his company. I liked him

because he did what I said. And he was such a sweet boy, not competitive like all the others.”

One day, the Harts were gone. Like any small town or tight-knit neighborhood, I’m sure there was all kind of talk about why. Keillor said he missed Donny for a while and then pretty much forgot about him.

Until twenty years later when there was a chance meeting at bus stop in St. Paul. Standing in the doorway of an abandoned building, keeping out of the snow, Keillor says he saw a group of men walking toward the bus stop. Immediately he knew by their gate and their antics that they were mentally retarded. They acted like kids, poking each other and pulling hair. Keillor goes on to confess, like the rest of us, the older he got the more uneasy he felt around the mentally retarded. We feel intelligence is so fundamental to being human. What we think and how we can think is who we are. Keillor said the group made him nervous so he moved away from where they came to stand.

Then the bus came and they all got in. Keillor says he recognized one of the men as Donny Hart. He knew it was him. He was the same – same build, same pleasant expression. And he said: “For the first time I realized he was mentally retarded. I never thought of him like that when I was a kid.”

He wasn’t sure Donny recognized him. But he said that the smell of wet clothing and their playfulness as a group brought him to the place of connecting with something deep inside – “like when we were all children,” he said, “like how we are all people together. I went to a place like we used to sing about in the old hymn about heaven – a place where there are no distinctions there.”

“I got off the bus and walked away,” he continued. “But I imagined I was still riding that bus, and that all of us in St. Paul and

Lake Wobegon, if we wanted to, could get on that bus again.”

I’d say that what happened to Garrison Keillor that day didn’t only happen at the bus stop or take him back to Lake Wobegon. I’d say what happened that day took him to the well. He met God’s grace there.

All the people we’ve met and discussed and thought we knew or almost knew, but not quite. What would it be like for us to set out on our errands today or while at work, school, the store this week, expecting Jesus to show up any minute – like Donny at a St. Paul bus stop. What would it be like for us to see and to be seen – that someone we thought we knew might be a miracle of grace for us, a miracle of some deep and holy recognition?

It’s an odd twist when you think about it. John never tells us the name of the woman at the well. Everyone in town knew who she was. But John left her nameless maybe so we could think hard about all the ways we “name” and “see” others without truly seeing them. John let the woman at the well be every woman or every man, alone at the well meeting Jesus.

Just like us. On an ordinary day. Waiting for the bus or whatever we’ll be at the well. And then, who knows what might happen. Who knows how deeply we’ll drink of living water.

God, enduring presence, goal and guide,
you go before us and await our coming.
Only our thirst compels us beyond complaint
to conversation,
beyond rejection to relationship.
Pour your love into our hearts,
that refreshed and renewed,
we may invite others to the living water
given to us in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

...