

A Known Witness

John 4:5-42

Erin Keys

First Presbyterian Church, Greenwich, Connecticut

They all think they know her, the one who comes at noon to draw water. Watching her from their darkened doorways, they peer out onto a dusty road that leads towards Jacob's well. She comes every afternoon at this hour, walking when the sun is at its highest point, the beams falling over her causing sweat to appear on her upper lip. She knows they watch her from the cool inside, thanking themselves that they aren't like her.

Everyone who is anyone goes to the well in the evening. As the sun moves to the corners of the horizon and the first stars appear, the earth lets out a sigh and the heat subsides. Twilight descends upon Sychar, and the thirsty come out from where they have been hiding. Everyone looks better in twilight; flaws are less visible as the hazy colors of pink mute what noon sun highlights.

A breeze ruffles the robes of the women as they come to the well. They catch up on the day's happenings as they draw the water that will cook their dinner and bathe their children. But not her; she has no children and no real husband either. She's been married before, you know. Many times actually, but everyone started to lose count around number three or was it four? The man she lives with now isn't her husband; he is just some guy — what was his name? I can't remember. They know her the way people know the actors in movies — through a lens where the audience can see things the protagonist cannot. Her life is the soap opera that everyone watches because they are bored and have nothing else to do. They think they know her, and tomorrow they will all watch again when she comes at noon, just like the day before and the day before that.

They think she goes to the well at noon because they make her. A socially imposed walk of shame; they think she knows she is not welcome at dusk. The truth is she comes at noon because it's quiet. She can stand the heat; it's their scorn that burns. The way they look at her, the way they part as she comes forward, their bodies signaling that hers is unwelcome. They think they know her, so they don't want to touch her.

We also think we know her because we've heard this story before, the story of a woman — a sinner — who is forgiven by our Lord. She was a character foil for his charity, the flesh to his divinity. She was everything that was wrong with the world standing right there, a waiting target for centuries of speculation, speculation that backs up the same assumptions that put her at the well at noon in the first place. We think we know her, the temptress, the tramp, the slut of Samaria who was washed clean at Jacob's well.

Did you know she never repented? It must have fallen out of the text because no confession is present, but surely, surely when she came face to face with Him, the first words to fall through her chapped lips would have been "I'm so sorry." But then, there is no forgiveness either. That too must have been erased by a meddling hand altering the drama we think we know so well. He never forgives her. Isn't that

strange? You'd think when coming face to face with a woman like her, the first thing He would say is, "You're unclean."

But that's not what He says, not even close. Instead He asks for a drink from her cup. "I'm thirsty," He says, and she looks at Him and replies, "Who are you?" No one ever spoke to her when she was at the well, not even the beggars who were out of their minds with hunger, you know the ones; even they had enough sense to know she was trouble.

"Give me a drink," He asks, and she looks at Him again. She narrows her eyes into a squint because it is bright outside, and she wonders if He is blind. She can tell by looking at Him that he is not a Samaritan, and she knows He can tell by looking at her that she's a boundary not to be crossed. Men don't talk to unclean women. Jews don't drink after Samaritans. It's a line in the sand drawn right there between them at the foot of Jacob's well.

He acts like he can't see this wall dividing them, like He didn't even know such a thing existed. He acts like He didn't understand that her showing up at the well at noon gave Him all the information He would ever need. He acts like He doesn't know her.

Maybe this was the first time in a long time she had been treated this way. Released from presuppositions, she feels like dry land that has just received rain after years of drought. You know what that looks like, the cracks begin to fill up, the dust settles, and eventually green spouts begin to poke their way through the newly moist earth.

But this time it is He who stands holding the bucket of this living water as He calls it, his living water that gushes and flows as it baptizes all whom it encounters, this water that trickles down mountain sides and falls over cliffs. Salamanders swim in it, and deer drink by its shores. Rolling over creek beds until the stones are slick, this living water has the power to carve canyons and shape continents. You can try to bottle it up, contain it in plastic casing, and sell it to thirsty tourists, but it won't be long until it's dripping off the sides of the bottle and running down the sidewalk. Living water is like that; it springs up from the source and flows where it will, never stopping until every last parched soul receives its fill.

For the woman at Jacob's well it was His acceptance of her, His willingness to not know her as the world knows her. It was all of who He was that set off ripples across her heart and the words that rise to her lips are, "Where can I get more of this?"

Jesus, throughout the gospel of John, moves in this way where He operates on one level by asking for a drink of water, but on another level His very presence is already flooding those who encounter Him with recognition that what this man offers, they need. It is He who holds the cup that will quench their thirst, and it is He who reflects back to them their true identities.

The woman at the well is John's first example of someone being known for who she is when in the presence of the Messiah. In this text Jesus has his longest recorded conversation with anyone in all four gospels—longer than he talks to his accusers, the disciples, and all those he encounters in roughly three years of ministry. What makes the dialogue at the well a most peculiar story is that it takes place with an unnamed woman whom we know very little about.

The things we do know about her are that she goes to the well at noon when most people go at dusk. We know she has had far more husbands than most consider ac-

ceptable, and we know that she is a Samaritan, one deemed “unclean” by the Jews. And even though you can’t sum up a person’s identity by noting their ethnicity or who they sleep with, it doesn’t stop people from trying. For thousands of years this woman has been interpreted as a character with a questionable reputation, and scholars and preachers alike have assumed that the shadier her past, the greater her ability to witness. However, aside from the five husbands, a circumstance that is not explained in the scripture, we have no basis for assuming we know why she went to visit the well at noon. The hour of her errand only reveals to us that this woman was ostracized by her community, a fact that should inspire pity as opposed to blame.

Admitting that the woman at the well is not who we originally thought means we must also reconsider why she is the first evangelist in John’s gospel. The scripture tells us that many came to faith because of her, but on what grounds? A sinner’s conversion always makes a good testimony, but that is not the story that is being told in this text. “I know one is coming,” says the woman, “the Messiah who will proclaim all things to us.” Perhaps one of the only things Jews and Samaritans shared was the belief in a coming Messiah—someone who would proclaim “all things” to them. When the woman recognizes that the one she is speaking with is the Messiah, her confession of faith becomes, “He has told me all the things I have ever done!”

All the things she has ever done. In other words, He knows all there is to know about her and yet does not see her for those things alone. This is the realization that causes the woman at Jacob’s well to leap up, forget her own water bucket, and run off to tell others about this living water she has discovered. It is the knowledge that she has seen God, and in seeing God, she has been seen for her true self. Mirrored in the eyes of the Messiah was her own image free of judgment, expectations, and ridicule. Her whole life people had been telling her who to be and assuming who she was, but it turns out that they didn’t have a clue, and neither do we.

There is One though, the Messiah, he knows who she is, and He knows who we are also. This is what makes her testimony so powerful, and it is this knowledge that brings many others to believe that Jesus is truly the Savior of the world. To be known by another is the most basic human desire. Every single one of us wants to be seen by someone else, accepted for who we are, and cherished simply for being ourselves. When we are young, we look for this knowledge in the eyes of our parents. As we grow, our friends, spouses, colleagues, and children become the mirrors we peer into hoping to see ourselves looking back. Jobs, salaries, notoriety, and acclaim also function as pools of reflection in the search for self. These things may satiate us for a while, but eventually we will find we are dehydrated, and the search will continue.

It turns out there is only one place to find this living water, this knowledge that we are known and accepted for who we are, and not who we want to be, not who we’re told to be and not who everyone thinks we are. There is only one place to find it, and it’s there at Jacob’s well at noon shining in the eyes of the one who knows everything about you and could tell you all about it, but instead chooses to show you who he is. In His presence you see yourself for the first time as one who is loved for no other reason than simply because you are alive. His offering you the first drink of freedom makes you decide you cannot live without this living water, and by God, neither can anyone else. So you leap up and shout, “Come and see, come and see the one who has told me all the things I have done and not done. Come and see Him who knows me just as I am.”