

Gracious God, we long for the gift of Your presence. Some of us are joyful this morning; others among us may be downcast or struggling. You know our hearts, O God; You know our hopes and our challenges. Each one of us stands in need of Your grace. Be present, we implore You, for the sake of Your love. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The child who begs her parents to “watch!” as she rides her new bike.

The teen who so carefully curates how he dresses, the music to which he listens,
and the nonchalant tone of his posts on social media.

The elder who tells long stories about the good old days at every family gathering.

Each of these yearns to be *known*.

Our desire to be known is visible in so many different ways.

Athletes know themselves through the thrill of discovering their capacities and limits: “See what I can do!” The performance artist may feel most alive, most *known*, when they’re being scrutinized by onlookers.¹ Philosophers and ethicists like to mull who we are and who we should be, as human beings. Social reformers become known through community-building: “Care about this cause with me; we’ll discover who we are *together*, as we fight for change.” Folks in small Southern towns know one another by tracing an intricate web of kinship, naming siblings and cousins near and far, whispering about family trouble and scandals because when you know someone’s *people*, you know who they are, as well.²

It's true of the attention-seeking politician and the monk who spends most of the year in silence. Both yearn to be known, whether by an adoring public or by God in the deep recesses of the heart.

When something wonderful has happened, we want someone to know that joy has changed us, has re-made who and how we are in the world. Conversely, in times of loss or trauma, we need someone to know that we have been disrupted at the core of our being. We need to be able to tell the story of what has hurt us, within our own experience or in the history of our kin or cultural group.

Refugees need to be known; forced migration is brutal because it tears displaced persons away from much that made them intelligible, *knowable* in their family and culture. Those experiencing homelessness need to be known. Those in prison need to be known, which is why solitary confinement is profoundly inhumane.³

Yet being known is hard. Being laid bare before the gaze of another can be destabilizing. Often we'd rather hide, from others and from ourselves. We avoid and medicate. We dissemble, *masking* ourselves because to be known requires a vulnerability and a kind of courage that can be hard to muster. Often it's easier to fight ... or pull away.

So: the *drama of being known* is powerful in our Gospel lesson this morning. Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well near “Sychar,” which many take to be ancient Shechem.⁴ Now, the religious and social barriers between Jesus and this stranger were quite serious. He reaches across significant lines of difference. The affront of a Jewish man asking for water from a Samaritan woman, in a setting where they were alone together, would not have been lost on the ancient audience. He asks for water, opening a dialogue in which mystery and misunderstanding slowly give way to clarity. It’s fascinating for us, as onlookers, to watch as each becomes known to the other.

The woman answers initially with mistrust, labeling Jesus an outsider and potential antagonist: he is a Jew, one who would not normally share a drinking vessel with a Samaritan.⁵ He redirects her flawed understanding: he is One who can offer her living water, water that will become a “spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” She still doesn’t understand and takes him literally: “Give me this water, so I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

The Gospel of John shows us, over and over, that the truth of Christ is deeper and more multi-layered than the unaware can grasp. Each time, deeper truth unfolds as the seeker explores, asks questions, fails to understand, wrestles with how what Jesus says could be true. It happened earlier with Nicodemus, who didn’t understand that the new birth of which Jesus spoke was spiritual.⁶ It happens here with the woman at the well, and with the disciples: Jesus says, “I have food you do

not know about,” and they’re all, “Oh, did someone bring him snacks?”⁷ It will happen later on with the crowd, when Jesus says he is the Bread of Life and they keep looking around for the loaves.⁸ Faith is *growing* understanding.

As we struggle to believe, we learn that what Jesus offers is Life itself,
more valuable even than bread for one who is starving,
more precious even than water for one who thirsts in the desert.

Jesus reveals himself as one with wisdom beyond human knowing. In a few words, he shows this stranger that he knows her intimate life history: she has had five “husbands” and is living with a man now who is not her husband.⁹ The way the story is told—Jesus having stopped briefly in unfamiliar territory—he could not possibly have known this through ordinary means. So the woman sees that “he is a prophet.” Here she is close to the truth,¹⁰ but Jesus unfolds a yet deeper mystery: he is the Messiah awaited by Jews and Samaritans alike.

The woman, astonished, hastens back to town: “Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!”¹¹ She is not fully persuaded about the particulars: “He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” she asks. In the Gospel of John, believing is a struggle and a journey, with misunderstandings all along the way. Remember, this is the Gospel that gives us a post-Resurrection scene with Thomas, who doubts even after Christ has been raised. The Samaritan woman may not be fully clear, but

she offers testimony as best she can: “Come and see!” Despite her uncertainty, she beckons others into encounter with Jesus.

We, the implied audience of the Gospel, know more: she has glimpsed

the Word made flesh,

the One who brought all creation into being,¹²

the One who is *Bread* and *Light* for the whole world,¹³

who is *Way*, and *Truth*, and *Life*.¹⁴

There is no miracle at the well.

Jesus does not make water stream from rock in the desert,

as Moses had done centuries earlier.¹⁵

There is only Jesus’ promise: “the water that I give will become ... a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

The Samaritan woman has that ... that, and the gift of being known,

a transparent, shimmering depth of encounter with One who

knows her more deeply than she could ever narrate.

Friends, each of you is known that deeply

by the One who made you and calls you forward into Life.

Jesus is *living water* to all who encounter him:

an inexhaustible spring in the desert of the human heart.¹⁶

Each of you has only to accept the invitation,
to accept the gift offered by One who has known you
since the first moment you drew breath.¹⁷

There is no barrier, no line of difference across which Christ cannot reach.

It doesn't matter what you've accomplished or where you've failed,
what rejoices your heart or what shames you,
what you understand or where you're still confused.

It doesn't matter. Just come.

Come and see the One who can tell you everything about your life.

Come and see!

Amen.

Carolyn J. Sharp

19 March 2017

Lent 3A

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ The gaze of the Other is regularly theorized in theater and performance art. Among countless examples: an artists' collective based in Berlin, [NGinPA](#), studied the "normative gaze in performance art," in 2013 and 2014; Marina Abramović, a performance artist well known since the 1970s, drew attention for her 700-hour marathon of mutual gazing in her 2010 work "[The Artist is Present](#)" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Not being seen, whether due to isolation or celebrity, can pose problems for the human longing to be known. Comedian Dave Chappelle

commented in a recent interview, “A lot of times when you’re a famous dude, you don’t really feel like a person is looking at *you*. They’re looking at the phenomenon that you’ve become. Every once in a while, a person will engage with you, and you’ll be like, O.K., this person actually sees me” (*New York Times*, p. C4 on March 18, 2017).

[On the pronoun “they” in the relevant sentence in my sermon: this is not an error. It’s a singular pronoun, chosen to help normalize this syntax for trans* and genderqueer folks whose gender identity cannot be described by “he” or “she.”]

² Here I articulate what I perceive to be the implicit logic underlying the lengthy narration of kinship connections and life events of others that I’ve heard from folks in small towns and rural settings in Maryland and Louisiana. My own view is that such conversation about others can often, though not always, express anxiety or prejudice. Gossiping and triangulation can reinforce unhealthy social boundaries and do not actually help people become more deeply known to one another.

³ See the 29 July 2013 editorial in *Scientific American*, “[Solitary Confinement is Cruel and Ineffective](#)”; the 19 February 2014 piece, “[The Science of Solitary Confinement](#),” on the Smithsonian web site; and a 13 October 2014 opinion piece in *The Guardian* [here](#).

⁴ On the location of “Sychar” as uncertain; so many commentaries, including Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 153. Jacob’s well, not mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, has traditionally been sited near Shechem. It may be relevant to our John pericope that in Genesis, a narrative of sexual violence and ethnic conflict follows the notice of Jacob’s settlement in Shechem (Gen 33:18-20; see Genesis 34).

⁵ See Marianne Meye Thompson, *John* (New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), p. 99.

⁶ John 3.

⁷ John 4:32-33.

⁸ John 6.

⁹ Just as Jesus does not judge the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), so he does not judge the Samaritan woman for her history of multiple partners. We should give this colorful detail neither an overly moralistic treatment nor an unduly naïve reading. The book of Ruth and the practice of levirate marriage would underscore the point made by Royce Victor that in the ancient world (and, I’d add, in other cultures and times as well), “women are pressured repeatedly to enter into new marriages in order to secure the patriarchal chain of inheritance” (“Jesus and the

Samaritan Woman: Liberation of a Dalit,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 30/2 [2016]: 160-76, at p. 172). Yet Ridderbos notes, “by Jewish standards and in the general Near Eastern view, it [would have been considered] an indecent extravagance for a woman to have been married successively to five men. And if that [were] followed by ‘living with’ another man, any claim to the honor of being a married woman had been totally abandoned” (*Gospel of John*, p. 160). Some scholars cite a virtuous oft-married female character in the book of Tobit (see Tob 3:8) as a counter-example, but that move is one that I find hermeneutically unpersuasive.

¹⁰ In light of the biblical trope of prophets being rejected by their own people, the Logos being rejected by his own (John 1:11) likely underscores prophetic dimensions to the fullness of Jesus as Christ, while making clear (still in John 1) that he is greater than any prophet. Nathanael’s exuberant confession of faith upon hearing a mundane “vision” of Jesus (1:48-49) demonstrates that in John, the idea of Jesus as prophet is both true and ironized as far from adequate.

¹¹ She recognizes that Jesus somehow knows vitally important dimensions of her life. The reference is certainly not only to her sexual history, *pace* some interpreters.

¹² John 1.

¹³ See John 6:35 and 8:12.

¹⁴ John 14:6.

¹⁵ See our lesson this morning from Exodus 17.

¹⁶ John 3:16.

¹⁷ To be sure, God knows each of us earlier than the moment of birth (see Jer 1:5; Ps 139:13-16). But our own capacity to know-in-relation is more limited, though I imagine that in mother-child and multiple-birth prenatal relationships, mutual knowledge does deepen during gestation. Here, I have chosen for my synecdoche birth as the inaugural moment when we can begin to grow in faith.