

*In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

We are having a midweek gathering this Lent, on Wednesday evenings and Thursday lunchtimes. About two dozen people come together for food and conversation about what it looks like to center your life on Jesus, and how small groups can deepen our relationship with each other as well as with God. This past Wednesday, one of the speakers in the video we watched reminded us that Jesus came to build relationship, to reconnect us to God in relationship. I say all the time, "Jesus did not come to start a religion; he came to build relationships." He built them with his disciples, with people he encountered – like this woman, and eventually her whole town.

And since he rose from the grave and ascended into heaven, he continues to build them with us. That's what I learned in my twenties – that the phrase "have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ" wasn't just a presumptuous expression – it was possible through developing a prayer life.

That's what the Samaritan woman Jesus meets at that well discovers – that what she thought of as religion was really a personal relationship; that the Messiah she and her people had long awaited was standing right in front of her, speaking her truth to her and yet not condemning her.

That is how the Holy Spirit works in us. In some ways, we are to God as wild animals are to humans – skittish, afraid to get too close. And God comes into our lives, sits down, invites us into conversation. We might try to obscure it or stay on a surface level of needs and thank yous, so that we can avoid really being known... but eventually we learn that we are in the presence of the One who already knows us, knows everything thing about us, the good, the bad, the ugly – and isn't walking away.

I love the way John tells this story – we don't know till halfway through that this woman has a secret. She has a reputation, one she's uncomfortable enough about that she would choose to go for water at the hottest time of the day rather than have to answer a lot of questions or listen to a lot of snickering. And there is this man, a Jewish rabbi of all things; she can't get away.

She thinks maybe she can just ignore him, but he goes and asks her for water. They speak and in the course of the conversation, he suddenly raises the one topic she most wants to avoid – her marital status and history.

He names her truth. But here's the thing: that's all he does.  
He doesn't add commentary, he doesn't condemn, he doesn't talk consequences.  
He just remains there with her, and she doesn't run away.  
And later, that is the very thing she cites when she runs to tell her neighbors  
about this guy they have to meet –  
“Come and meet a man who told me everything I ever did.”

Here is a person from whom no secrets are hid, to quote the prayer book.  
Here is a person with whom she can just be herself, no need to pretend anything.  
Whatever else happened in their encounter, she feels some kind of acceptance.  
What would that look like for you? What would you not have to hide,  
or not make appear better than it is, if you could just truly be yourself?

Our world is a place of judgment and blame, of attention for producing well  
and oblivion for performing poorly, or not at all.  
“Publish or perish” is the way in academia. “You're only as good as your last  
deal,” in business, or your last movie, or your stats in sports.  
That is not the Kingdom of God! Not the community Jesus came to initiate.  
He came to foster the kind of ideal community based on mutual love, *koinonia*,  
in which we can all just be ourselves all the time, letting our feelings show,  
whatever they happen to be in the moment, doing things well,  
doing things poorly, being loved no matter what.

One step on the way to making that kind of community, I believe, a community  
in which not only are “members” accepted, so are visitors and outsiders,  
is to start accepting the acceptance of God, the God who made us and  
knows us better than we even know ourselves.

This Lent we are talking about how to find our balance amid the stress  
and anxiety that surrounds us.

Much of my anxiety comes from what I fear others will think of me.  
At first I thought I was anxious about failing, but underneath that is something  
else, that my reputation as an effective person will be compromised.  
I have high expectations for myself, based in part on things I've managed to  
do well, and that can have the effect of ratcheting up the pressure.  
So I have to think, “What would freedom look like for me?”  
It would be to value what other people think about me, and not to be concerned  
about it. Not to over-value the opinions of others.

That also means I also need to not over-value my own opinion,  
since I can be a pretty harsh critic.

I need to learn to live in the light of God's opinion of me.

I'm learning to name it when I feel anxious about something,  
and name who it is I fear will see my failure and judge me for it,  
and bring it all to Jesus in prayer. That's a place I can be real.

What are those areas in yourself that you wish no one would know about,  
or that add to your stress and anxiety?

Think about that this week; write it down, or tell another person.

That's a good way of taking the air out of our anxieties – speak them.

You might even try getting into this scene in your imagination – get quiet,  
centered, then imagine yourself sitting by a well on a hot day.

What does the heat feel like? What do you smell, hear, feel on your skin?

When you really have the scene set, see if Jesus shows up in it – often he does.

What do you talk about? What does he say? What do you share with him?

Whatever it is that causes us pain or sorrow or worry, we can  
bring it all to this well, this font, the source of new life for us.

The living water welling up in us includes affirmation for who we are,  
and acceptance of who we are.

We can access that love any time, and then we can share it.

*Amen.*

**John 3:1-17**

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, **no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.**" Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, **no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.** What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so **must the Son of Man be lifted up**, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

**Genesis 12:1-8**

The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **I will bless those who bless you**, and the one who curses you I will curse; and **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"

**Romans 4:1-5(6-12)13-17**

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as

something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. [So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin."

Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.]

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") -- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.