

TEXT: John 4:5-42
THEME: The deepest hunger is to be known
SUBJECT: Dialogue
TITLE: To Be Known

Third Sunday in Lent
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Messiah Moravian
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Thomas Nast was a 19th century caricaturist and editorial cartoonist. He was at a party with some friends. One of them suggested he draw a caricature of each person at the party.

Using swift, bold strokes of his pencil, Nast made quick sketches of each of his friends. The sketches were passed around for everyone to see. Much laughter and good-hearted joking followed. Then something unexpected happened. Everyone recognized the caricature of the others, but few recognized their own.

A commercial currently running for an insurance company plays on this phenomenon. A caricature artist draws an unmistakable sketch of one of the men filming the commercial. When the artist shows the man the sketch, he says "I don't see it." Perhaps the old saying still holds: If we saw ourselves as we really are, we would need an introduction.

Elizabeth O'Connor believes the deepest craving of every heart is to be laid bare, to be known, to be understood. CK Williams illustrates how deep is this craving. He boards the metro and has to ask a young woman to move the packages beside her to make room for him. She is reading, her feet propped on the seat in front of her, and barely looks up as she pulls them to her.

He sits down and takes out his own book and notices her glancing up from hers to take in the title of his. She becomes present in a way she hadn't been before. Though she hasn't moved, she allowed herself to come more sharply into focus, be more accessible. She leans back and as the train rocks and her arm brushes his she doesn't pull away. This simple act of not recoiling from the touch of a stranger makes Williams feel acknowledged, known.

How deep is the ache that an accidental touch, the smile of a stranger we pass on the street, eye contact with the one who serves us coffee, can make us feel acknowledged, known. Pope John Paul II beautifully describes such an experience. "No one between us but light deep in the well, the pupil of the eye. Within your eyes, I, drawn by the well, am enclosed." To live so brilliantly in the eyes of another is to know love.

Jesus' "accidental" encounter with the woman at the well becomes an occasion for dialogue. The purpose of real dialogue is not to persuade another person to accept our opinions, or values, or view of the world; rather it is to create understanding - a climate where communion takes place.

Dialogue is more than your giving me space to say my words, and my giving you space to say your's. It involves listening. We are all different. We cannot have dialogue unless we

honor differences. How can I build a bridge across the gulf between me and you unless I am aware of the gulf? How can I communicate with you unless I see how things look from your side?

Dialogue demands that I leave the place where I dwell - the landscape of feelings and thoughts that are important to me - in order to dwell for a time with your thoughts, feelings, perceptions, fears, hopes. I must deny myself - forsake the familiar, give up my life - in order to experience your life.

If we ever take the time to know another life, we will be experienced as godly - as "one who cares." When we are listened to and understood, the clouds roll back, the dawn breaks, life-giving water springs up in our hearts. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "The one in whose presence you know who you really are - the good and the bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it, will be experienced as the Messiah."

This accidental encounter with Jesus gives the woman the courage to go back to the village to face the people she thought she could never face again. We don't know for certain why this woman is at the well at noon, when the custom was for women to go to the well in the morning and again in the evening.

Is the noon visit an indication that she is socially ostracized or just a convenient literary device to facilitate a one on one dialogue? Whatever the case, this woman courageously declares to the whole village, "Come and see the man who told me everything I have ever done?"

To be known, fully, to be accepted, fully, gives us the courage to live, fully, freely, courageously. In a letter to a lover, one writer confessed: "I felt today that all my courage and even my appetite for experiencing life come from the certitude of being understood, supported, and approved by you. If these, your gifts to me, were not there, everything would fall apart and I'd be adrift."

"Here is the insight most central to spiritual experience," writes Parker Palmer. "We are known in detail and depth by the love that created and sustains us . . . This love knows our limits as well as our potential, our capacity for evil as well as our capacity for good. Yet, as love, it does not seek to confine or manipulate us. Instead, it offers us the constant grace of self knowledge and acceptance that can liberate us to live a larger love."

We all want someone to hear us above the din of modern life, and stop a moment and turn and tell us, yes, they've heard. Not only have they heard, they have acknowledged what we've said. And what is more, that what we've said matters in this absurd world where so little matters. Where this happens life-giving water springs up in our hearts and the soul is nourished.