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A: Lent 3
John 4:5-42

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“Encounter with Jesus”

I know some of you have heard this story, but not everybody has, so I'll share it briefly.

When I was in seminary, I was an agnostic. I wasn't sure if there was a God or not.

And it must have been when I was signing up for courses by second year

and I saw one titled, “Knowing God: Psychological Illusion or Spiritual Reality”,

and I thought, “Oh! Maybe that will tell me if there's a God or not!”

And I signed up.

It turned out that the premise of the course was that every one of our relationships,

be it with another person or with God, starts out as mostly illusion and very little reality.

But as the relationship grows, the reality increases and the illusion decreases.

The closer and the more intimate the relationship becomes, the more one really knows the other.

I share that because that's exactly what is happening in our gospel story for today.

In just one conversation, 2 strangers end up sharing their deepest truths with one another.

I invite you to take a look at exactly how this happens,

Jesus begins the conversation with a curt command: “Give me a drink”.

Now what is surprising about this is that Jesus was reaching across a number of huge divides.

there was the racial divide (Jews were a pure race while Samaritans had intermarried with non-Jews),

the gender divide, the religious divide, and the respectability divide.

The woman answers, “How is that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

In other words, she is pointing to the divides, and indicating that they should respect them.

So if Jesus was to engage her, he needs to offer her something that will make her willing to bridge the divide.,

and so he says, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’,

you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

Ok. He's got her interest. But she's suspicious as well. Who does he think he is?

And so she says, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?

Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well?

And of course, Jesus knows that he is greater, because he has something to offer that is more than mere water, something that will quench every thirst this woman will ever have.

He tells her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again,

but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.

The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to abundant life!”

Now he's convinced her. She WANTS what he's offering!

“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

She's still thinking that it's literally about water, but what Jesus wants is to meet her deepest need,

and she has given him the perfect opening by calling him, “Sir” –

because that is the same word for “Lord” AND the same word for “husband”.

Jesus knows why she is here at the hottest part of the day.

She is here when no one else is because she is obviously not accepted by the other women

who come in the cooler morning and the cooler evening.

And the reason they don't accept her is most probably

because she is neither a married woman nor a chaste widow.

And so he commands her, “Go, call your husband, and come back”.

She could lie to him.

But there is something about this man that inspires in her a trust that she normally doesn't have for anybody.

For some reason she feels she can be perfectly honest with him.

She can be her authentic self.

And so she tells him the truth – or at least a little bit of it. “I have no husband.”

She has told him the truth, at least part of the truth, and he sees no point in dragging the details out of her.

He can already feel her pain and her shame. No need to compound it.

He looks into the deepest recesses of her heart and mind and soul,

knows everything about her, and speaks her truth for her in a way that is completely devoid of judgment.

With full knowledge, full understanding, and full acceptance, he says:

“You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’;

for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.

What you have said is true!

At this she is completely blown away. How on earth can he know her so well?

“Sir, I see that you are a prophet”, she begins.

He's a prophet, but he's still a Jew, so does that mean the Samaritans are wrong & the Jews are right?

Is she on the wrong side?

“Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain,

but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

And Jesus explains that there are no sides.

All of those divisions – between races, genders, social stations, faith traditions – are about to be bridged.

None of these outward things are important.

Only one thing is necessary: to love God with all one's heart & soul & mind & strength.

“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father
neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...in spirit and truth...”

Ok, thinks the woman.

He's talking about an ideal time in the future – like when the Messiah gets here.

“I know that Messiah, the Christ, is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”

Is she wondering if he's the Messiah? Well, he is the Messiah.

And yet, he is so much more than that.

He's never told anyone the whole truth about who he was before.

But she has shared her deepest truth with him, and so he will share his deeper truth with her.

He is not only the Messiah, but he is in God & God is in him, and so God is he & he is God.

He, like God, is the Great I AM.

He has not told anyone else – not his mother, not his cousin John, not his best friends, not anyone.

But he will tell her. “I AM. I AM is speaking to you.”

So now do you see what happened in that conversation?

They started out that day as strangers, and not just strangers, but two people who were different in every way,

and who had been taught by society to believe that they had nothing in common & should therefore not mix.

But something happened in that first conversation that neither one of them expected.

It started out with his thirst which led him to ask her for a cup of water.

But almost immediately he saw her deepest need and he knew he could meet it.

He gave her a glimpse of what he had to offer and when she admitted she wanted it,

he invited her to share her authentic self, her deepest truth, her deepest need with him.

And for some strange reason, the woman trusted him –

he who was different from her in every way – and she told him everything.

And in that moment, she experienced the most profound grace she had ever known –

a feeling of acceptance and belonging and love like she'd always sought but never found.

And it was that feeling that propelled her to leave her valuable jar with its precious contents
and run back to tell everyone in the village what had happened.
It didn't matter they had all judged her & ostracized her & caused her unbearable heartache.
All those hurt feelings had fallen away in her encounter with Jesus
and the love that filled her heart at this moment was just too much to contain –
she had to tell someone, she had to tell everyone.

It didn't even matter that she hadn't had time to process everything he had said.
It didn't matter if she wasn't sure if he was a prophet or the Messiah or something more.
It was not about explaining.

She just wanted everyone else to experience what she had experienced –
that profound peace, that glorious grace, that life-giving love.

She didn't even stop to consider that they might not listen to her.
And ordinarily they would not have.

But there was something so different about her, they had to.
And they all came back with her to the well.

Like Nicodemus, the woman at the well was born again.
In her encounter with Jesus she experienced a feeling like she had never before felt,
and it changed who she was from that point on.

And the way we know that she had been changed, that she had been born again,
is that she couldn't wait to tell others what had happened to her.

Remember that this was the woman who went out of her way
NOT to engage with her community.

She deliberately kept to herself, so that she wouldn't be scorned or harassed or bullied.
And yet, after her conversation with Jesus, she RUNS back to the village
and tells everyone about the encounter she had with this man.

She's not at all sure who or what he is – a friend, a prophet, the Messiah? –
but it doesn't matter.

She can't wait to sort it all out so she can explain it rationally and reasonably.
She simply has to tell everyone because she cannot contain her excitement and joy.
“Come & see a man who told me everything I have ever done!
He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”

Her encounter with Jesus has changed everything about her.

And it's obvious to everyone in the village.

This was not a woman who had their ear or their respect or their trust.

Normally they wouldn't believe a word she said, but she was behaving so differently –
with a new confidence and boldness – and her excitement and joy were so exuberant
that it was obvious that something quite remarkable had occurred.

“Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony...

So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there 2 days.
And many more believed because of his word.

They said to the woman,

“It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves,
and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Remember how I said that it was to this outcast Samaritan woman
that Jesus first revealed himself to be the Great I AM?

Well these are the only people in the entire gospel of John to call Jesus “the Savior of the world”.

So here are the 3 take aways from this story.

First, Jesus reached out to the woman
and she shared with him the deepest truth of her life.
And Jesus revealed his deepest truth to her.
She didn't get it all right away, but she got enough to have her heart healed,
which was just the beginning of the transformation of her life.

That's what Jesus wants with each one of us – to know our deepest truth –
and to reveal his deepest truth to us.
Like the woman, we won't get it all right away, and in fact we'll never get it totally,
but once we've had that encounter of profound grace,
the transformation of our lives will continue.

Second, the way you know
that someone has had that kind of profound encounter with God,
is that they will tell you about it.
It didn't matter if she had spent her life
hiding from people, avoiding their company, refusing to engage.
Once she experienced that all-encompassing grace, she couldn't keep quiet about it.

The same is true for each one of us.
It doesn't matter if we're normally a shy or reticent or private person.
Once we encounter that overwhelming grace,
we will simply be unable to keep it to ourselves.

And third and finally, it's not just enough to hear about someone else's experience –
we must have our own encounter with God.
The Samaritans heard the woman's testimony which brought them to Jesus,
but in the end, they believed, not because of what she had told them,
but because they had had their own encounters with Jesus.

That is true for us as well.
We need to hear the witness of those people whose stories are recorded in the Bible.
We need to hear the witness of other people in our lives.
But just hearing about other people's encounters with Jesus
will not transform our lives.

We must have our own encounter with Jesus – an encounter in which we experience
such a profound peace, such a glorious grace, and such a life-giving love,
that we will never ever be the same.

Let's pray.... Amen