
You are Known
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 4:5-26 (and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q49BbfgJbto>)

Well, it's hard to know what to say after that monologue. We hear the words. We see the passion. We feel the love and fear mixed together. We sense the power of knowing someone, and of feeling known. When we read the story in the gospel of John as we just did, we often hear the story from Jesus's perspective, or perhaps from the perspective of the disciples. The video is the same story, but very clearly from the woman's perspective. Have you ever felt that someone truly knew you? That they really understood you? That they "got" you? It can make all the difference in the world.

In the 2009 movie *Avatar*, a group of humans go to a world called Pandora in order to extract a valuable mineral called unobtainium. The humans are primarily only interested in the mineral, but they come up head to head with the local inhabitants - humanoids called the "Na'vi". The humans have brought the best military technology with them. The Na'vi, on the other hand are deeply spiritual beings, connected to each other and to their natural surroundings - but they have very limited military power. It is difficult to watch *Avatar* without seeing many linkages between the movie and the imperialistic way that Europeans extracted natural resources from North America with significant disregard and limited respect for the native inhabitants.

But while the cultural clash and the fighting is going on, one human - Jake - inhabits a Na'vi body, and he starts to learn about the Na'vi culture and society by living with them and learning from them. Over time, he comes to respect their ways. Over time, he comes to see the Na'vi as "people", not "savages" as he had been taught to think. Over time, he even comes to see one of the Na'vi - Neytiri - the daughter of one of the leaders, as a friend and eventually, as a soul-mate.

In the movie, the phrase that the Na'vi use to show endearment is - "I see you". As in, I know you. I respect you. I see you as you really are. Really seeing who a person is is an expression of love. In Jake's case, he saw both the Na'vi culture, and he saw the person Neytiri. Seeing, respecting, and loving turned out to be the same thing - for both

the individual and the culture. Avatar is fiction, of course, but as I'm sure you know, the same story happens in real life too.

As you may know, for 6 years I spent time visiting with inmates at the Toronto West Detention Centre. I liked to visit inmates who I could see every week while they were incarcerated, because that allowed us to develop a relationship with each other over time. One person I used to visit with - I'll call him Jim - had for many years suffered from delusions. His delusions took the form of spirits who he would interact with - including angels, and even the devil. Jim shared with me many stories about these spirits, his interactions with the spirits, and how those interactions affected him. I listened to his stories. And I tried to help him make sense of the chaos in his mind.

Then, one day, Jim was sharing a story and one of the spirits reminded me of a spirit Jim had told me about perhaps a month earlier. So I asked Jim if it was the same spirit, and I described the spirit from the other story as well as I could remember. But when I described the spirit from the earlier story, Jim just froze. He just stared at me. Then, his whole body and his face became soft. He came very close to crying. And then - he simply said - "yes". "Yes" meant that I did make the right connection between the characters in Jim's stories. But Jim's "yes" meant more than that. "Yes" meant that I remembered the details well enough to make the connection. "Yes" meant that I cared enough about Jim to listen to his story and remember the details. "Yes" meant that I saw Jim. "Yes" meant that I knew Jim - at least on some level.

Jim had spent most of his life behind bars. He had told his stories numerous times to many different people. But most people just let Jim's stories go in one ear and out the other. Jim was delusional after all. Truth be told, Jim's delusions were drug-induced. So most people just ignored Jim while he talked. Jim, like the woman at the well, was an outcast. But I listened. I heard. I remembered. I saw. I knew.

And Jim's reaction to being known was transforming. For both of us. Jim knew that I saw him. Jim knew that I knew him. Being known by someone else is a powerful experience. And for Jim, like for the woman at the well, it was not an everyday experience - particularly for social outcasts. Jim, and the woman at the well, were separated from "good" society by barriers they could not overcome themselves. Knowing

another person requires breaking down those barriers.

If that's a bit too touchy-freely for you, there are other ways to consider the story of the woman at the well. Here's a much more sterile way to read the story. Many scholars believe that the story was crafted as an analogy. Recall that when Babylon took the educated and wealthy Israelites into exile in the 6th Century BC, the group we call Israelites became two distinct groups. The exiles became the group we now call Jewish, and those who were left behind became the group we call Samaritans. By the time Jesus arrived on the scene, these two groups had developed a deep hatred for each other. The sort of hatred that can only develop between groups that have a common past.

According to 2 Kings, during the exile the king of Assyria settled people in Samaria from 5 different kingdoms, and the Samaritans inter-married and embraced these 5 kingdoms. By the time of Jesus, the Samaritans, now living in what we call Palestine, were dominated by Rome, but the people had not embraced the Roman culture quite so well as they had embraced the previous 5 kingdoms.

So, according to these biblical scholars, the woman at the well represents all Samaritans. The woman's 5 previous husbands represent the 5 kingdoms that were embraced by the people of Samaria. And the man currently living with the woman who is not her husband represents the Roman Empire that was tolerated by not fully embraced by the Samaritan people.

If we read the story in that way, then the story is not about a particular woman who was ashamed because of her many sexual partners and her divorces. Rather, it is a story about cultural barriers. It is a story about the barriers between two groups of people with a common ancestry. It is a story about separation and hatred. And into this story comes Jesus, who has a mission for all people. Jesus seems to see right past the barriers and limits to community that are just as outdated and pointless as the division between Samaritans and Judeans.

So regardless of whether we read the story of the woman at the well as a personal struggle, or as social narrative, either way, the story is about moving past barriers in order to better know the "outcasts" in our midst. Sometimes, completely different ways of reading the Bible yield the same message.

Sometimes, that barrier between “us” and “them” gets very thin on its own. Take the current coronavirus crisis for example. We knew nothing about it until December 2019. And at the time, it was something that only affected “other” people. But in the space of about 2 months, the barrier between “us” and “them” has shrunk. On Wednesday of this week, a member of this church was debating cancelling a trip. On Thursday, we cancelled the Cootes Paradise concert. On Friday, we were having discussions about how to respond as a community of faith right here in Brantford. The barrier between “them” and “us” changed without any effort on our part. Sometimes, we need to be more intentional to remove barriers.

I once participated in a story-telling event, where the stories that were shared were personal stories shared by homeless (or formerly-homeless) people who had (or used to have) addictions to drugs. The stories were very painful to hear, because all of the stories started with a story of child abuse - stories of abuses that had been done to the story-tellers when they were young. The stories were all different, but many of them contained elements of how the persons survived at all without the supports that most of us take for granted. I was as usual completely blown away at the tenacity of these story-tellers, and their ability to maintain some sense of what justice looks like, while living in very unjust situations. These stories came from “the other”, people we generally prefer to label and then ignore. People we call “druggies”, “worthless”, “lazy”, and other words we use to create barriers. But in the telling of their stories, barriers came down for most of the people listening. Because personal stories are so ... personal. Personal stories break down barriers because we - the listeners - are confronted with the fact that these stories come from actual people.

Think about it this way. If you care about “homelessness”, then good for you. But homelessness is a concept, a subject for philosophical rumination, or perhaps fodder for a sermon that doesn’t invite you to grow. If you care about “homeless people”, then good for you. But “homeless people” is an abstraction, a classification, a judgement. If you care about homeless people you might do good work in policy and social planning. And yes, that work is needed. If you care about “a particular homeless person” - like “Abigail”, then good for you, because people - all people - deserve the opportunity to live

good, meaningful, wholesome lives.

During the story-telling event, we were introduced to a number of actual people, actual “Abigails” and we were invited to reflect on the barriers we choose to live with. Or more accurately, we were invited to reflect on the barriers that we choose to live behind. Because seeing the humanity in other people actually allows us to better see our own humanity. Treating other people as human beings enables us to be more fully human ourselves.

Jesus crossed social and cultural barriers during his ministry. If Jesus had refused to interact with the woman at the well, his ministry would have changed, and become more closed-minded. If Jesus had refused to talk to the woman at the well, it would have affected her, but it would also have impacted Jesus and his understanding of his ministry. We at SHUC have the same opportunity. We define our ministry here based - in part - on our willingness to see and to know “the other” in our midst.

[what cultural or social barriers exist in Brantford? Are there people that you do not want to know? Who is “the other” here?]

Earlier I said “I once participated in a story-telling event” about homelessness. I suppose I should also tell you that event was 3 weeks ago, right here in Brantford. We live with, and behind, barriers, right here and right now. But we can change that.

We are called into the mission that includes knowing other people. But in practical terms, how are we supposed to engage in this? Are we - like the disciples - going to stand by the wayside, watching, confused and disjointed? Do we feel bound by a sense of our traditions or our religious structures that limits our ability to really see and know others. Are we afraid that if we looked, we might not like what we see?

Or, are we willing to take the risk to truly look. To see others as they really are. To see ourselves as we really are. And are we willing to live with what we see. Are we willing to know others and to let them know us. Are we willing to truly know ourselves?

We are known. We are loved. That is enough.

Amen.