

Jesus and the woman at the well, John 4:4-30

The story of Jesus and the woman at the well is a long story, with all different kind of paths we could take through it, many different ideas we might pursue. I'll point out in passing, for instance, that the phrase about worshipping in spirit and truth has always been important to the way Friends worship. But the direction I'm taking has to do with the way I've been thinking about help lately: about what the demands of being helpful are, what it means that we want to help others, and how we go about doing it. I find, very often, that I believe that my "goodness"—if I have any—is in what I can do, in how useful I am, what I can make, what I lend my hands to. And I feel pretty confident, that in this room I'm not the only one with those feelings. I'm fairly certain that nearly everybody in this room is a person who feels called to be helpful in the world, helpful to the world.

At the same time, giving help can be difficult and confusing. Giving help can be so confusing that even at the same time that we feel called to help, we can have a competing urge to walk away, to pass by and ignore any person who might seem to need our help. We want to be helpful, but we find at the same time that we don't want to know that much about somebody else's business, we don't want to get drawn into a commitment that will never end, we don't want to be tied to a person who begins to depend on us. We don't want to wind up doing more harm than good, the way we might if we keep cleaning somebody's mess so they never learn to clean on their own.

Garret Keizer has written a book on help, and he points out there that in the biblical story of human origins, Eve is created as a help meet for Adam. A help meet is a fit helper, which means that God considers Eve a fit helper for Adam, and so, we assume, Adam is also a fit helper for Eve. Giving and receiving help is so central to who we are as human beings that we assign that gift, or capacity, to the very first human beings of whom we can conceive. And,

even back there in the very beginning, the problem of how to help already creeps in. Because one of the first helpful acts we know of is Eve's presentation of the apple to Adam. Which is the basic essence of help, in a way: it can be poison or it can be grace, and when we start to give it, we never quite know which it will turn out to be.

So if we have a chronic fear of becoming too involved, it's with good reason. If we don't offer as much grace as we might, it may be because we've handed out far more poison than we ever intended; or found that the poison was reciprocal. Even though we carry the defining impulse to help, it also makes sense when we keep our distance, draw boundaries, and limit our involvement. We do this with our acquaintances, our friends, and even in our own families. Because sometimes being helpful requires way more than we have within us to give.

Then I look at this story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus asks for help, for a drink of water. The woman eventually asks for help of her own—for the living water Jesus is telling her about. Does she actually get the living water? The only hint we have is the conversation about her husbands. And yet she runs away excited and enthusiastic, ready to believe that Jesus is the messiah. Why? Because he knew her, because he saw what her life was—he saw who she was—because he told her everything she had ever done. And who could know her in that way but God?

I think of all the psalms, I probably find psalm 139 the most comforting, even more so than the 22nd psalm. The comfort of 139 is that it is a hymn about God's ability to know us:

Psa. 139:0 To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
- 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
- 3 You search out my path and my lying down,

and are acquainted with all my ways.
 4 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O LORD, you know it completely.
 5 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me. ...
 Psa. 139:13 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb. ...
 15 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

I can't explain why it matters, that anyone should know us the way God does in this psalm, but in my own experience, and in what I see when I look around me, I see that being known and understood matters a great deal to me, as it does to the people around me. We want to be known, to our very depths, and in our most inward parts.

I think, for instance, of a scene from the recent movie "*Shall we Dance?*" In that story, a man has started taking lessons in ballroom dancing without telling his wife, and she eventually starts to wonder why he keeps coming home so late. She hires a detective to follow him. She's relieved, but puzzled, to find out from the detective that her husband is attending dancing lessons. Eventually she decides she doesn't need the detective anymore. She pays him a visit to let him know, in person, that she no longer requires his services.

It has been clear for some time that although the detective does his best to be honorable, he finds this woman very attractive. In this last meeting, he draws her into conversation on the subject of marriage. He admits that his own marriage failed because he cheated on his wife, and they both see the irony of his present profession, in which he spends his days and nights sorting out the faithful spouses from the unfaithful. "Then why do people get married?" he

asks. “Not for passion,” she says. “[It’s] because we need a witness to our lives. There’s a billion people on the planet—I mean, what does any one life really mean? But in a marriage, you’re promising to care about everything—the good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things—all of it, all the time, everyday. You’re saying, ‘Your life will not go unnoticed, because I will notice it. Your life will not go un-witnessed, because I will be your witness.’”

It’s for that very same reason, I think, that psalm 139 speaks to some deep mystery of yearning in nearly all of us: because our life has some meaning to us when we can think that someone—in this case, the someone is God—that someone cares enough about our life to witness it.

In the psalm, the witness is God. But that idea of being a witness is another way that I could think of myself in relation to others. To be intimate with another, to know someone else, doesn’t mean I have to come up with solutions for their problems, doesn’t mean I have to be prepared to fix what goes wrong in their lives. I don’t have to be helpful in a hands-on kind of way. I can also be helpful, I can also be an instrument of God’s grace, if I am simply a witness. It is meaningful, and helpful, even if all I ever do is notice. That is, I think, a large part of the living water that Jesus drew for the woman at the well—the very fact that he knew her. Despite her failings and her slip-ups, despite the fact that she was of a persuasion his own people could barely tolerate, he knew her, he knew who she was and what she did. And we ourselves can become channels for God’s living water when we become willing to know each other, to witness each other. Which means that we become willing to see the failings and slip-ups, along with the successes and strengths. We don’t always have to work with our hands at helping. We do a great thing when we promise to be watchful, to witness the lives around us. At home, at work, on the street—and in this room.