

Third Sunday in Lent
March 19, 201
John 4:5-42

The Bumblebee and the Well

The assignment for the youth group that night was to bring something that symbolizes who you are. Jenn Stanley, the youth leader, a student at Presbyterian College, brought along her golf shoes. Her skill at golf had won her an athletic scholarship to “PC,” as it is known by locals. Jenn figured those shoes said a lot about who she is and who she’d like to be.

Jenn wasn’t sure the kids in the youth group would remember the assignment from the previous week, or if they did, whether they’d be willing to be so self-revealing. All the teenagers in the group lived at the Thornwell Home for Children in Clinton, South Carolina – just across the street from PC. Few of the children at Thornwell arrive there by choice. Many are removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect. Some are brought by relatives who can no longer care for their children. A few arrive in the dead of night, with nothing more than the clothes on their backs.

They can be infants, or toddlers, elementary-aged kids, or teenagers. What they all have in common is that they need a family to take care of them, and that it’s not their fault they are there. They didn’t do anything wrong.

That being said, everyone at Thornwell has a unique story, and the very biggest mistake you can make is to assume that you know someone else’s story.

The lanky kid with the middle-school swagger and the swooping haircut that hid most of his face was not a likely candidate for self-revelation that night. He wanted people to call him “Taco,” which said a lot about his aspirations to be “cool,” but little about his own story. So, Jenn was surprised when Taco reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a homemade figurine. It was made of baked clay, I think, or perhaps stone – painted to look like a bumblebee.

“I made this in school,” he said (meaning the school he attended before he came to Thornwell.) “I was going to give it to my Mom when I got home that day, but then the police came to my school to bring me here to live, and I never got the chance. That was two years ago, and I’m still waiting to see her. I’ve got the bumblebee, though, and when I see my Mom, I’m going to give it to her.”

Never assume you know someone else's story.

She came to draw water from the village well at the most unlikely and unsociable time of day – high noon. All the other women in the Samaritan village of Sychar came to the well early in the morning or in the cool of the afternoon. They would linger there, chatting and catching up on each other's doings. I imagine that at least a little gossip might have been mixed in those conversations round that well.

I imagine, too, that that might have been the reason she came to the well at high noon – to avoid the other women's knowing glances and whispered asides. Of course, I can't be sure. That could be my inherent sexism kicking in. The Gospel writer John doesn't provide any details. He doesn't even give us her name.

What's important for John is not that we know her story, but that Jesus knows her story.

She is surprised to see a foreign man sitting by the well, and even more surprised that a man -- and a Jew at that -- would ask her for a drink. Back then, Jews and Samaritans didn't share things like buckets or cups to drink water out of. This story reminds me of the water fountains marked "colored" that were so common in my childhood.

"How is it," she asks of this stranger, "that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

If only you knew, comes the reply. If only you knew the gift of God and who it is who is asking you for a drink, you could have asked for living water, and he'd have given it to you, and you'd never be thirsty again.

Then follows a theological conversation of considerable complexity, in which this woman shows herself to be no mean theologian herself. She is more than holding her own with this theologically astute stranger until he asks her to go home and bring her husband back to join the conversation.

"I haven't got a husband," she replies, which is the truth, but not the whole truth.

“You've had five husbands,” the stranger tells her, to her utter astonishment, **“and the man you're with now is not your husband.”**

And, you might have noticed, the stranger, who is Jesus, doesn't tell her this to shame her, or to cast blame, or to cut off the conversation. The way I read John's account, Jesus is simply getting to the heart of things -- past the presumptions other people have made about this woman, past the gossip, past the prejudice her neighbors harbor that keeps her on the margins, past the barrier of Jew and Samaritan, past even the barrier of male and female.

Jesus knows who she is, deep down, and he doesn't turn away. I get the feeling that the only person who can “save” this woman -- who can make her whole, who can help her to become reconciled with who she is in the presence of God and who she is in her own skin – is the one who already knows who she really is, and does not turn away. This woman's savior – her Messiah – is the one who knows her story, and in the knowing, blesses her.

Jenn, the youth leader at Thornwell I was telling you about, graduated from Presbyterian College, and became a Director of Christian Education in a Presbyterian Church not too far away from Clinton. After a few years, the Holy Spirit's tug on her heart brought her back to Thornwell, where she now serves as Director of Faith Formation and Christian Nurture. It was Jenn who told us about Taco, the middle-schooler with the bumblebee who was waiting to give it to his mom. By the time Jenn returned to Thornwell, Taco had long since graduated and moved on.

Not so long ago, a memorial service was held at Thornwell for an alumna of the community. As the congregation gathered, Jenn noticed a handsome young man in a United States Navy uniform enter the church. “Who is that?” she asked a colleague. “I don't know,” came the reply.

Yes, you're way ahead of me. It was Taco, all grown up and Navy proud. After the service, the community held a reception and meal. Jenn approached Taco and asked if he remembered her. “Sure,” he said. “Golf shoes.”

“Could I ask you, did you ever get to give that bumblebee to your Mom.”

“Yes,” he told her. “I did. It took a few years, but I got to see my Mom again. And when I did, I gave her that bumblebee.”

Not long afterward, Jenn confessed, she looked for Taco’s mom on social media. Sure enough, she had a Facebook page. (Doesn’t everyone these days?) And on that Facebook page, Taco’s Mom has written a tag line. Can you guess what it says?

Thank God for second chances.

We never learned Taco’s real name – or for that matter, his mother’s name. We never learned why the police picked him up from school that day or why it took so many years for him and his Mom to meet again. What we do know is that for years, Taco lived in a community that was formed around a well whose name is Jesus, the same Jesus who asked for water from a woman of Samaria, the same Jesus who knew everything about that woman – knew her story even better than she knew it – knew and did not condemn -- knew and blessed her in the knowing.

The gospel tells us that this same Jesus knows your story and mine. If there is shame in your story, he does not add to it. If there is pain in your story, he takes it upon himself, so that you don’t have to bear that pain alone. If there are aspects to your story you cannot bring to words, Jesus does not ask you to say what cannot be said. Instead he gives you water to drink and time to feel his blessing.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: **God proves his love for us in that while we still sinners, Christ died for us.** That’s another way of saying that, in Christ Jesus, God knows our stories, however much pain they bring to God, as well as to us. God proves his love for us in that, before we know how thirsty we are, God gives us water from the well that reaches right down into God’s heart of love.

That Samaritan woman left her jar at the village well and ran to tell her neighbors, **“Come and see a man who told me everything I have done! He can’t be the Messiah, can he?”**

A Messiah who knows our stories and does not turn away? A Savior who blesses and in his blessing forgives? A Christ who died for us before we could speak his name or feel his love that will not let us go?

Can this be? Can this be Taco's story? His mother's story. Your story? Mine?

And the people of the village 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 Saviour of the world!"**