

John 4:1-42
(Psalm 117; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23)
“Heart of Jesus: Heart of God”

Introduction

Who is God? And who am I? These two crucial identity questions lie at the heart of the human quest for knowledge, and recur in the Scriptures and in theological works throughout the ages. Moses, standing before the bush that burns but is not consumed, asks precisely those two questions of God: Who am I and who are you (Exodus 3:11-13). John Calvin, in the greatest theological work of the Protestant Reformation, opens with these words, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*).

But if coming to know ourselves is so difficult that it requires a lifetime of thoughtful reflection and wise counsel, how can we ever hope to know God, or even to know whether there is a God to know? The answer sought by prophets and philosophers, by mystics and practical workaday people, is not so much discovered as revealed and recognized when one encounters Jesus.

He alone is truly God and truly human, and came to reveal to us who God is and who we are meant to be – indeed, who he is willing and able to make us become through his saving work on our behalf. And when we see him and meet him in a story such as this, we realize that God is not who we thought he was and that we are not merely what the world tells us we are.

There is far more in this story than we can grasp in any one sitting, but I want to highlight five ways in this story that Jesus shows us the heart of God and calls us to follow him.

Body

1. Jesus was willing to go anywhere to find lost and broken people (4:3-4).

John says that Jesus “left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria.” The words “he had to pass through Samaria” would not have satisfied a religious Jew of Jesus day. Yes, Samaria – what we today call “the west bank” – was between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north, and the quickest route passed through Samaria. But religious Jews, in order to avoid the pollution of contact with the hated Samaritans, would travel east from Jerusalem to Jericho down in the Jordan River valley, and then head north through valley, skirting around Samaria, finally entering the Galilee at the Sea of Galilee.

But Jesus “had to pass through Samaria.” The only reason could be that he had business there, a woman whom he would meet and whose life would be transformed by their encounter. Jesus, unlike too many of his followers, was willing to go anywhere – even places considered unsafe and unclean – in order to seek and save the lost.

Is there anywhere that we would be unwilling to go in order to join the one whom we call Lord in seeking and saving the lost?

2. Jesus was willing to meet with anyone in need of living water (4:7-9).

More the point, Jesus’ culture gave him two reasons not to speak to this woman. As she herself noted, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (4:9). A religious Jew would not be caught talking with a Samaritan or speaking alone with a woman who was not a member of his own family. In fact, when his disciples returned, John tells us, “They marveled that he was talking with a woman” (4:27).

Is there anyone, any group of people, any kind of people, whom we are unwilling to love so much that we would embrace an opportunity to sit and speak with them about the deep things of life, about our fears and needs and desires, about the things that alone lead to life? When asked by the religious leaders why he ate with sinners, Jesus responded, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ... For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:11f).

But note that, when Jesus sat and spoke with just such a person, he did not confront her from a position of power and pride. Rather, he humbled himself.

3. Jesus was willing to be vulnerable to find common ground (4:7-15).

In order to get her to speak of the deepest longing of her heart, Jesus asked her to help him get water. All that follows begins with a simple request: “Give me a drink” (4:7). It is his willingness to confess his thirst and his need of help that opens the way for a discussion of living water:

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water” (4:13-15).

Those who are willing to share what they believe too often think that they have to seem omni-competent, to show no weakness or need of help. Nothing

could be further from the truth. The whole principle of the incarnation is that, in order to bring salvation, one must be willing to lay aside any power and glory that one possesses and make oneself what appears to the world to be foolish and weak. As the apostle Paul observed,

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men ... [therefore] God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong ... so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Corinthians 1:25f).

This is the very heart of the gospel and too often missed by those who try to advance God's Kingdom through the kind of wisdom and power that makes us feel strong and competent, and that ends up bringing, not God, but us, the glory and praise.

This is why the apostle Paul wrote,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).

In the simply act of confessing his thirst and asking for help, Jesus acted out the principle at the heart of the incarnation, of God becoming one of us and one with us in order that we might become children of God.

4. Jesus was willing to bring pain in order to bring healing (4:16-18).

Not only was Jesus willing to be vulnerable and say, "Give me a drink," but he was willing to press into this woman's brokenness and need, exposing the most humiliating parts of her life in order to bring her healing and salvation. "Go call your husband," a perfectly proper request. It was not appropriate in that culture for a man and woman unrelated to each other to be sitting together alone engaged in conversation.

But Jesus' reason for asking was much deeper than merely satisfying propriety. He knew that no one drew water at high noon in the heat of Samaria unless one did not want to have to encounter the gaze and gossip of others. The woman answers, "I have no husband." And Jesus responds, "You

are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true" (4:16f). Jesus twice commends her honesty while exposing her immorality.

Once again, it is Jesus' willingness to get into the messiness of life and to speak honestly of his need of water and of her need of confession and repentance – the living water of the gospel – that open the way for his memorable conversation with her about the nature of true worship and about his own identity as Messiah.

Please don't miss this: Jesus gives this woman his clearest teaching about the nature of the kind of worship that God seeks from us – “those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:24) – and until the end of his ministry, when he turns his face toward Jerusalem to face the cross, this woman is the only one to whom Jesus clearly states that he is indeed the Messiah: “The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming ... When he comes, he will tell us all things.' Jesus said to her, 'I who speak to you am he'" (4:25f). In this brief conversation by the well in Samaria, Jesus gives this woman the water of life with a clarity that we find in few other gospel passages. His words to her would lead, as recorded in the rest of chapter, to the salvation of her entire city.

The question is why? Why did Jesus share so openly and intimately with this immoral Samaritan woman?

5. Jesus was willing to make this woman's salvation his food and drink (4:31f).

Jesus did not minister from obligation but from love and compassion. It was not something he had to do and so did, while all the while eager to get it over and be free to do the things that really energized him. Quite to the contrary, when the disciples showed up with food and said, “Rabbi, eat,” he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” The disciples asked one another whether someone, perhaps this woman, had given him food. But Jesus responded, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (4:31f).

The only way to understand Jesus is to realize that he was driven by self-sacrificial love, love even for those whom this world does not count as worthy of love. And the only way to understand God is by looking at Jesus and realizing that when we see Jesus, we are seeing who God is. If Jesus is moved by self-sacrificial love, then so is his Father, whose words he came to speak, whose work he came to accomplish, and whose grace he came to offer and display.

Conclusion

It only remains to state the obvious: Jesus came, not only to show us who God is, but to show us who we are meant to be. Passages such as the one we've been looking at are written for our instruction and challenge. Jesus calls across the ages, his Spirit says to those who claim his name, "Come, follow me!" We cannot follow him without going where we would otherwise not go, where we would only go with him, and by loving and even seeking those whom the world – and too often the church – does not value.

We become more fully mature, more fully human, as we learn to love what the Lord loves and to hate what he hates, and in discovering that only pursuing the Father's purposes can ever satisfy the hunger of our hearts. In the end, the disciple of Jesus is also learning to say, "My food is to do the Father's will and to accomplish his work." And when our hearts and minds recoil from the task at hand, to say with Jesus, "Not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

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