

A Conversation at the Water Well

John 4:5-42

March 19, 2017

As most of you know, in 2010 with the help of others, I started a feeding ministry called ARISE at Grace. I have numerous stories to tell about ARISE, and over time I might tell them all, but for today, I want to share what things were like on that very first day. After setting everything up, we had about 5 minutes before we were to open the doors and my dear friend and former Pastor Morris Brown asked everyone to gather together. So we circled up and held hands and Morris shared with us his vision for this new ministry, and I pray daily that I never forget. Morris said, my biggest hope is that whoever walks through those doors knows that we see them, knows that their life is valuable and knows that they matter. If those things can be accomplished through this ministry, then I believe transformation is possible. Morris offered a prayer and then we opened the doors and greeted 8 people we had not previously seen in our everyday lives.

With the words of Morris' vision on my mind I began to greet these new "friends" hoping that I was letting them know I "saw" them. Then a tall black man walked directly up to me and clinched his fist and stuck it out in my direction, and this is what happened:

Me: [Being the son of Tommy Frank Knight I responded with an open hand to shake his hand.]

Man: [Shaking head side to side sticks his clinched fist out to me again].

Me: [This time I responded appropriately and gave him a fist bump.]

Man: "I'M DUKE."

Me: "WELL HELLO MR. DUKE."

Man: "I DIDN'T SAY MR. DUKE. I SAID DUKE!"

Me: "YES SIR, I'M SORRY DUKE. IT IS NICE TO MEET YOU."

Duke: "WHY DID YOU MOVE YOUR OFFICE?"

Me: "IM SORRY, WHAT WAS THAT?"

Duke: "WHY DID YOU MOVE YOUR OFFICE? YOU'RE A LAWYER, AREN'T YOU?"

Me: "THAT'S RIGHT."

Duke: "AND KEN, JR. IS YOUR PARTNER."

Me: "YES THAT'S RIGHT."

Duke: “AND YOU USED TO HAVE AN OFFICE AT THE CORNER OF WEST MARKET & COMMERCE.”

Me: “YES THAT IS RIGHT, BUT I MOVED OUT OF THAT OFFICE ABOUT 3 OR 4 YEARS AGO.”

Duke: “YEAH I KNOW. I USED TO SEE YOU COMING AND GOING EVERYDAY, BUT I HAVEN’T SEEN YOU IN AWHILE AND I WAS JUST WONDERING.”

I was stunned, to say the least. How had I not seen this man? My law office was in that location for 5 years, but I never saw him. Where was he during this time that he could see me “coming and going” without me ever seeing him?

I understood exactly what Morris was saying when he shared his vision about the value of letting people know they are seen. Heck at that time I was teaching a series centered around taking steps outside of our self-created bubbles, and here I was in real time, coming face to face with someone who had seen me enough to recognize me after 3-4 years’ time had passed and I had never seen him.

I’ve shared this story many times and each time I share it, some ask if I was scared when Duke began telling me about myself and where my office was located, and each time I tell them no. Duke was a gift to me that day... In that single exchange, Duke let me know how badly I needed to slow down and see the world and the people around me. That encounter was the start to a friendship between Duke and me. A friendship unlike any other I was used to... a friendship that helped open my eyes.

Have you ever wondered what life would be like if no one saw you? Now I’m not talking about in some weird “invisible” or “ghost” like way. No, I’m talking about a real lived life where every day you “feel” invisible to the world around you. A real lived life where your invisibility serves as a constant reminder of being rejected by those around you... Rejected by society.

Well, if you are anything like me, being seen has not been difficult. In fact, the thought of not being seen really has never entered my mind, and this is the reason my heart breaks for all of those who feel that no one ever sees them. My heart

breaks for those who believe they don't matter and that their life has no value. My heart breaks for those who find themselves saying, if I wasn't here no one would realize.

My heart breaks for the Samaritan Woman walking to the well that day. A woman rejected by others, walking alone, a long distance from home in the hottest part of the day, doing a task women of her day did with others. Not to mention a task she could have done closer to home. And while we can't know all that we want to know about her and her story, when placed in the appropriate historical context, we know a lot.

You see, even though the text doesn't tell us how each of her 5 marriages ended, when placed in its proper context we are certain none of her marriages ended because of her choice. This is why it is so important for us to recognize that it is our nature to read stories through our way of understanding how the world works, and while this can be appropriate sometimes, the stories of our Bible might change when read like this.

If we read through 21st century eyes, some might reach negative conclusions about a woman, 5 times married and currently living with someone else. These negative thoughts seem to vanish though when we recognize that women of her day were seen only as property; not human beings. During this period of time women could not decide much of anything about their own life... Not to marry and definitely not to unmarry. If we think she made the decision to be married and un-married 5 times, then friends I have no doubt we miss Jesus' point entirely. Jesus chose her to lead a spiritual revolution and this is why I believe we miss everything this story has to offer unless we understand what it meant to be a woman in that day.

It was not easy to say the least. Just listen to the way Philip Yancey describes those days: "In those days, at every synagogue service Jewish men prayed, 'Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hast not made me a woman.' Women sat in a separate section, were not counted in quorums... In social life, few women would talk to men outside of their families, and a woman was to touch no man but her spouse."

And then we have Jesus come along and freely associate with women, even teaching some as his disciples. Jesus' understanding of the power of womanhood was absolutely counter-cultural. His approach to women, his invitation for friendship went against everything people thought they knew about how to live with each other. Doesn't this story of the woman at the well tell us as much?

Just think about it, Jesus went out of his way to travel to places to share the good news. Traveling through Samaria was not the preferred route for Jews going from Galilee to Jerusalem. Traveling through Samaria was potentially dangerous as sometimes the Samaritans would attack pilgrims going from Galilee to Jerusalem, and so many would go a different way, down the Jordan valley to Jericho and then up the hill from there to Jerusalem. In fact, that is what Jesus and his followers did on their last journey together, but not this time. And while some might say Jesus knew he would encounter this woman at the well, I'm not so sure about that. What I do believe is that Jesus knew full well he would have an encounter with someone rejected by everyone else. I do believe Jesus knew by choosing to travel through Samaria he would encounter someone who might not initially want to talk with him.

This is simply another example of Jesus' openness. He always seemed open to new encounters. He always seemed open to friendship with those disregarded by society. Jesus always seemed to see them and value them.

The thing is, those whom Jesus encountered had to be open to new possibilities too. And while last week it was Nicodemus, this week it is an un-named Samaritan woman at the well. I imagine she could have been closed off to Jesus when seeing him at the well, but she wasn't. Jesus was extending her an invitation to a type of relationship she had not previously known, and her openness to it changed her life. You see, this is a story about **Kingdom Making and Boundary Breaking**.

During those first few months of ARISE, Duke and I began spending a little more time together. I would pick him up some days and we would go eat lunch at Libby Hill on Summit Avenue in Greensboro, and I really enjoyed our budding friendship. I learned a lot about Duke and he learned a lot about me. We both seemed very open to learning from each other.

Then one Tuesday morning Duke walks in for breakfast at ARISE and walks straight up to me and points at me and very loudly says, "I OUGHT TO HATE YOU! IN FACT I OUGHT TO HATE ALL WHITE PEOPLE!"

Now you can only imagine how the other volunteers reacted to what was happening, but suffice it to say they all scattered.

So I stood there with Duke yelling at me and trying to calm him down because I really wanted to figure out what I had done. Duke then said: "AND YOU KNOW WHAT? I GOT REALLY MAD AT GOD LAST NIGHT! I WAS YELLING AT GOD AND I WAS REALLY MAD!"

So I asked Duke why he was so mad at God, and his response to my question floored me. Duke said, "YOU KNOW SOMETHING I WAS REALLY MAD AT GOD BECAUSE I CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHY GOD CHOSE YOU TO BE MY FRIEND!"

You have no idea how overwhelmed I was in that moment, because I understood exactly what Duke was saying. I knew Duke had every reason to be mad. He grew up in segregated Mississippi. He was friends with Emmett Till, the teenage African-American boy lynched in Mississippi after being falsely accused of flirting with a white woman.

Duke was college educated but never given a chance by the white business owners in the south, so he became a cab driver. Duke had every reason to be mad. From vicious racism to oppressive societal rules that had done great damage to him and others like him. Those same rules that played a part in his sleeping on the sidewalk under the stairs at the church across from my old office. Duke had every reason to be mad.

Yet on that morning as every other volunteer scattered at the booming sound of his voice, I stayed and I listened. I listened to my new friend tell me that I was his friend too. Despite all the reasons he had, all of the reasons society had given him to hate me.

I listened to my friend tell me how hard it has been for him to be open to the ways God was working in his life, and I understood.

When all was said and done, Duke put his arm around me and said, “NOW THAT’S ALL I HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THAT,” and I knew he was right. The funny thing is, as I reflect on that day, I have come to realize that Duke and I had both gone out of our way to share good news with each other. And both of us were starting to open ourselves up to what God was doing with us, and lives were being transformed.

Now, in just a moment, we will break bread together, and in doing so we are accepting Jesus’ invitation to come to the Table. This time though may we come to the table with a deeper understanding of what it means to go out of our way to travel into places to share the good news for this is exactly what Jesus did when he chose to travel through Samaria. This is where he encountered the woman at the well and it changed her life as well as the lives of those she told. Going out of our way like that is **Kingdom Making and Boundary Breaking**.

This is what Jesus taught, both in his words and his actions. This is central to Gospel living. This is the way lives are transformed.

Dear God, Let it Be!
Amen.