

Leo Tolstoy's classic, War and Peace begins with a soiree at Anna Pavlovna's home.

What I've always found remarkable about this particular beginning, which you don't need to have read to understand, is the very familiarity of the characters. Tolstoy's treatment of each captures some essence of their character, some intrinsic quality that transcends the page and enables us to *know* the characters. We've never met them, never going to meet, them, they're fictional after all, but we *know* them. They are familiar.

Take Princess Drubetskoy: she's a pauper in rich world. She needs money for her son's advancement, she's too proud to ask for it, yet too maternal not to ask...she's like anyone who has a need they can't talk about. Or Princess Elise...pregnant, her husband is going to fight in the title war, she is lonely and afraid, and all her clinging to him only makes him want to leave all the more. Then there are the imbecile who only speaks non-sequiturs, the social climber who is petrified he will be seated lower than his station, the pseudo-intellectual afraid his cover of erudition will be blown, the bureaucrat asked for favors, and of course, the politically naïve zealot...haven't you met these characters?

Whether on a page or in real life, we know people who fit these parameters. We are the people who fit these parameters.

Wouldn't that be true irony indeed: that in addition to recognizing these characteristics in others, perhaps we also recognize them, in varying degrees in ourselves? But recognizing then, don't we also hope no one sees these traits? In our most honest moments, we know that there are sides of ourselves that we want to keep hidden. And in some cases, we successfully keep hidden. But what we see as endearing in a novel could

be unnerving in person, perhaps even frightening when we consider what others see that we do not.

That's what I think happened in this story from John. This nameless woman doesn't lead into conversation with confession. But I think we know her.

I don't know why, but I've always thought there was a poignant humor to this story, this woman waiting by a well, this story where Jesus himself appears almost the imbecile speaking in non-sequiturs. Perhaps it is because I detect an element of humor that I see her almost like Flo from Mel's diner, I'm sure some of you remember Flo: brassy, coarse, using bluster and her trademark line to hide her vulnerability. I see her leaning up against that well, her waitress uniform worn at the elbows and cuffs, run out on her lunch to do her grocery shopping, and just when she's about to wrap it up, push her buggy through the checkout line, this fellow interrupts her.

"I need a drink." He says,

"Look, buddy, what you need is your own buggy."

We know what that means: leave me alone, I don't have time for this, I spend all my life waiting on people, and you know what, I'm in a rush now. Get it yourself.

And this, of course, would be the part where Jesus really hits his Johannine stride, informing her that if she knew him, if she really knew him, she'd toss aside the buggy and the groceries and take this water of life that he's offering. There he goes again, speaking in non-sequiturs.

Part of what I find so humorous about John is precisely this logical disconnect that occurs so regularly in Jesus' sayings throughout John's version of the story. Consistently, the characters in John, so many without names, run into some very real nuts and bolts

scenario, concerned with very real, physical matters, and Jesus turns their questions back on them, “no, no, that isn’t what you need, what you really need is...”

The implication, of course, is that we don’t even know what it is we really need. Under the auspices of getting a drink of water, Jesus speaks to this woman, and when he does, he speaks to *her*.

She doesn’t get it at first. She’s far too smart to let that happen. You don’t live her life, work her job and not pick up some street smarts. You learn how to handle the cheeky ones over time...

“give me this water, Lord knows I don’t need to be coming here to shop every day...”

“Go get your husband and come back...”

With this, he shoots an arrow straight into her; not into the caricature of her, but into her very self, her hidden self. He speaks to the part of her that she doesn’t wear publicly, the part that she is afraid to show. She wasn’t prepared for that.

“I have no husband.”

How do you see it? A downcast look? A quivering lip? A defiant chin...what gives us away when we most want to hide ourselves?

Like a scalpel cutting away the disease so to make room to heal, Jesus words cut through her obfuscation...

“You’re right. You’ve had five, and the man you are with now, he’s not your husband either, is he?”

She’s not the tart of the town, she’s a hurt woman: damaged goods passed from man to man until the man she’s with now won’t even give her the dignity of marriage.

She balks, she tries sarcasm to deflect him – sort of shot out chaff to get him off her trail.

“so...you’re a prophet are you!”

What follows is good, old-fashioned lashing out. He has gotten close...too close for comfort perhaps. With her remarks about Jews and Samaritans, she has already thrown up a racial barrier, only to have it knocked down. Failing that, she tries a religious barrier next, “Why is it”, she hammers away, “that you Jews who worship in Jerusalem won’t include us, but when we worship on our own, you claim there is no temple but Jerusalem...does God hear our prayers less because we are Samaritans?”

Looking closely at the text, notice that Jesus has said nothing about the temple.

Whatever the substance of their discussion, it hasn’t been that. It’s just another way of putting out her arm to keep him away. It’s just another way to slink past her secret shame.

But that isn’t what Jesus wants, not by any means. He wants to liberate her from her shame.

You see, he knows her, he knows her secret sorrows. He loves her more than she loves herself. But she doesn’t know that. She doesn’t know him.

She thinks she does. She is steeled for condemnation, prepared for rejection...she’s got it all sewn up, she just *knows* how those Jews are going to react her people...it doesn’t matter that it is entirely irrational that Samaritans and Jews throw such criticism at each other...to her, the Jews don’t like Samaritans, and the Samaritans don’t like her, it’s a tragic chain.

She has to work hard to hold onto some shred of even liking herself, because she surely knows that everybody else doesn’t. That is, after all, why she’s out at mid-day. Anyone

with half sense went at dawn or dusk not at the heat of the day, anyone who wanted the community of friends gathered around the well then. She was there at midday because there was some reason why she shouldn't be there during the peak times.

She thinks she knows him, but she doesn't. Then there comes that moment of clarity, that moment of knowing and being known. It's a communion of sorts, knowing and being known...there was no bread or wine, and yet in knowing she was known to him, the artificial curtain she had rigged to hide behind was swept back like the flimsy barriers of a shared hospital room, and all the sudden, there they were, talking.

At every turn in their conversation, hurt just floods out... You read the words, but what I hear is, "You think you're sooo good...you think I can't understand..."

As the awareness she is known and not rejected washes over her, defenses fall to confession. She lets go of the hurts, each one falling like a rock out of a bag she has been carrying for years and when the last one falls, when the last rock is redeemed, she has changed.

Then of course, right on time, the rest of the crowd shows up. The disciples arrive, they round the endcap and see them standing there talking. And John tells us they were *astonished*.

Have you ever thought to yourself how often Jesus' disciples are astonished by his conversations with people? What do you think that says about us?

Now to the early church, the role of this woman would have been clear. She was an outsider brought in by Jesus. It's a pretty standard pattern that permeates the four gospels. We see it over and over again, and sometimes we get it and sometimes we don't, or at least so the reaction of the disciples seems to indicate.

“Yes, Jesus, we get it, you want us to let the outsiders in. Enough already, you’ve made your point. We’ll work on it.”

There’s a problem with that understanding, though. It’s not just that it isn’t inclusive enough, (though it isn’t). It’s that we forget who *we* are in this story.

Forgive my grammar, but we’re her.

We’re not the disciples in this story, we are the woman at the well. That’s why we know her!

And we think we’ve got it hidden. At least the really juicy stuff is hidden. Don’t we?

But if we are the woman at the well...then Jesus knows us. Jesus really knows us, better even than we know ourselves.

Our hidden selves remind me of the soiree at Anna Pavlovna’s again...all of those people trying to hide their deepest needs when everyone knows them. What are we not so successfully hiding? What is that secret sorrow that lurks in the back of our minds...well, if God knew this...if Jesus knew that...it would be a different story.

Yet Jesus knows us. Jesus loves us. We don’t need to worry about an incremental revelation of ourselves to Jesus – he already knows us and loves us. We don’t need to start by revealing the pedestrian material and working our way to the *really* shameful stuff...sort of a what’s behind door number one confession. “what, you know that and you still love me...well how about this...really, still? Well, I bet you wouldn’t if you knew this...”

We’re not the disciples in this story, we’re her. And Jesus knows us.

There is a danger that accompanies radical inclusion, though, and that is the danger of relativism. A while back, after I had preached a sermon in which I highlighted the nature

of God's inclusive love, preaching that all our intrinsic worth is derived from our nature as God's creation, a point I stand by, incidentally, a visitor caught me at the door of the church on the way out and said, "that was a wonderful sermon. Now, just so I understand it, were you saying, 'I'm okay, you're okay, we're all okay?'"

No. The point of knowing Christ and being known by him is not that I'm okay, you're okay, we're all okay. It is rather the opposite. I'm not okay. You're not okay. None of us are okay. But we are redeemed.

We are redeemed. That is a very different thing.

It is such a simple theological concept with such potentially radical application. If I'm redeemed, and you're redeemed, and we're all redeemed, then we are all known to God, who knows us and loves us.

Perhaps it is a struggle to know that God knows us. Perhaps not. If God knows you, then God knows the real you, not the nice you, not the polite you, not the confident or the scared you, not the funny you, but the real you. I'm convinced that concept is positively unseemly.

In the end, though, that God knows us is a comfort. There really isn't any need to hide from God, which seemed so naturally the reaction after the fall. We've become accustomed to hiding. But that is not what God wants for us.

We need something other than what we think we need. It's not the nuts and bolts we're concerned with, though we seem to spend our lives organizing them. Oh, they're important enough, but really it's the knowledge that God knows us that we really need.

How different is life when we know God knows us?

I can't answer that. I have hints of how life is different for me in this knowledge. And again, it would be positively unseemly for me to dredge all that out, much akin to taking a bath in a storefront. You don't need to know everything about me any more than I need to know everything about you, and with all love, there's a lot I really don't want to know! But I need to know that *God* knows my *hidden* self, and so do you. But what is more important is to know that God *loves* my hidden self, and God loves yours. And we are redeemed.

In a sense, that is what we proclaim when we come to the font, when we declare that we are dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus. We are declaring at *this* well of living water that God knows us deeply, that we are valuable to God, precious in God's sight. There will never be a moment in my life, or yours, where we are ever alien to God. God knows us and God loves us.

God knows you and loves you. That's what we come to this table to remember.

At the end of the day, knowing that God knows us is not so much about whether or not God's knowledge of us is embarrassing as it is about remembering that God cares.

I worry sometimes that this reminder may come across as trite, or tired, or just not very meaningful.

But, if you have ever stood in the midst of a national cemetery with the acres and acres of monuments around you, if you have ever walked past the AIDS quilt or the memorials on the national mall, you know it matters that God knows us and loves us.

If you have ever sat in the hospital waiting for death to come, you it matters that God knows us and loves us.



If you have ever handed your child over to the nurses to take to the surgeon and awaited the report, you know it matters that God knows us and loves us.

If you have ever remembered our own action with your ears burning in shame, you know it matters that God knows us and loves us.

I was at a funeral not too long ago where the minister was preparing to say the sentences over the casket in the graveyard, and as he named the man's name, he called him a child of God, and a sinner of God's own redeeming. That's really the point.

It matters that God knows us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.