

Faith Questions: Can I Be Honest with the God Who Knows Me? Sunday, 3/4/18

1 Max Lucado shares this moving story about wandering through a cemetery near a freeway interchange, with grave markers dated as early as 1807. One marker in particular caught his attention:

Then I saw it. It was chiseled into a tombstone on the northern end of the cemetery. The stone marks the destination of the body of Grace Llewellen Smith. No date of birth is listed, no date of death. Just the names of her two husbands, and this epitaph: Sleeps, but rests not. Loved, but was loved not. Tried to please, but pleased not. Died as she lived-alone. Words of futility. I stared at the marker and wondered about Grace Llewellen Smith. I wondered about her life. I wondered if she'd written the words . . . or just lived them. I wondered if she deserved the pain. I wondered if she was bitter or beaten. I wondered if she was plain. I wondered if she was beautiful. I wondered why some lives are so fruitful while others are so futile. I caught myself wondering aloud, "Mrs. Smith, what broke your heart?"

Raindrops smudged my ink as I copied the words. Loved, but was loved not...Long nights. Empty beds. Silence. No response to messages left. No return to letters written. No love exchanged for love given. Tried to please, but pleased not...I could hear the hatchet of disappointment. "How many times do I have to tell you?" Chop. "You'll never amount to anything." Chop. Chop. "Why can't you do anything right?" Chop, chop, chop. Died as she lived-alone.'

I wonder, as did Max Lucado, how many people in this world bear these kinds of raw, emotional scars on the inside, pretending to others, pretending to God, and perhaps even pretending to themselves that they're doing fine, all the while living lives of quiet desperation. Today we're continuing our Lenten journey of asking ourselves faith questions. These aren't just academic questions. They cut to the core of who we are, how we live, and what we hope for in our future. And very often, the deep questions we ask about our faith touch on parts of our lives that we're reluctant to bring into the light of day. Lent is especially a time for self-examination, a time to ask ourselves uncomfortable questions. If you haven't yet received one of these mirror cards, be sure to pick one up in the lobby. Let

¹ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/two-tombstones-the-story-of-the-samaritan-woman-and-jesus-christ-11582592.html>

this mirror, or any other mirror you peer into this Lenten season, be a reminder to you to intentionally reflect on your walk with God. Let the mirrors in your life guide you into a closer walk with Jesus, preparing your heart for Easter.

2 Our question for reflection today is “Can I be honest with the God who knows me?” On the surface, the question seems absurd, doesn’t it? Don’t we all believe that the God who formed us from the dust of the earth, the God who knit us together in our mothers’ wombs, knows already absolutely everything there is to know about us? Why is it, then, that we so often choose to live in ways that suggest God, far from being intimately present in every aspect of our lives, is actually off taking a siesta on some cloud in heaven? Why is it that we try to hide our pain and sin from God and God’s people? What will it take for us to honestly reflect on the failures and disappointments in our lives, the times we’ve all slept, but rested not; loved, but were not loved; tried to please, but pleased not; and perhaps harbored the fear that we’ll die as we live, alone.

The story we call “the woman at the well” is the longest recorded conversation in the Bible between Jesus and a single individual. When you think about that, it’s pretty amazing! This woman had absolutely nothing to recommend her for this top spot. She was a woman-strike one. She was a Samaritan-strike two. She was living with a man who wasn’t her husband-strike three. She was clearly an outcast from her community, coming to the well at a time of day that she knew she wouldn’t have to come face to face with any other women. This woman was so unimportant that we aren’t even given her name. She’s the perfect stand in for any one of us who’s feeling disadvantaged, sinful, broken, cast out, or unimportant. But none of us are meant to remain in that place of brokenness forever. As Julie Rains notes, “Timing, honesty, and willingness to see a different reality can lead to dramatic change.”² That’s exactly what happened to the woman at the well when she met Jesus, and her world turned upside down.

3 Isn’t it interesting that most of the encounters recorded in the Gospels between Jesus and other people took place not in the Temple or in a synagogue, but out in ordinary places where ordinary people lived out their lives? What might have happened if Jesus, fresh from

² <https://www.workingtolive.com/woman-well-transformation/>

his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, had called together a building committee instead of disciples, and set to the construction of the first church building in Jerusalem? I wonder if one thing that made it easier for the woman at the well to be honest with Jesus is that she encountered him on her own turf, a place she visited every day and knew well. As a Samaritan, she never would have set foot even once in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Jesus demonstrates a basic missionary principal that we're trying to learn this month as we develop new missional habits to surprise the world: People are much more receptive to having an honest conversation about their faith when we go out and meet them where they are, sharing a meal with them or even simply offering them a word of encouragement. When we expect people like the woman at the well to show up first at our Temple here at 609 8th Street Northwest, how easy are we making it for them to be honest about who they are, where they've come from, and what their struggles and pain are? Incidentally, that may also be one of the reason small groups gathered around prayer and Bible study are sometimes more fruitful when they meet in someone's home rather than a church classroom.

4 Do you remember these simple billboard messages that used to line the highways? Amazing things happen when we talk honestly with God. The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman took so many unexpected turns. Why didn't the woman deny her adultery? Why didn't Jesus condemn her? This woman, perhaps for the first time, had a conversation with someone that was zeroed in on surfacing the truth rather than judging her. And so she dropped all pretenses and faced the truth, and the truth set her free. In the part of the story we didn't read today, she abandoned her water jug and ran off to tell everyone about Jesus. She traded the water from the well for the living water of Jesus, and she would never be the same again.

Max Lucado suggests that each of us wants to do the same thing: "You've wanted to take off your mask. You've wanted to stop pretending. You've wondered what God would do if you opened your cobweb-covered door of secret sin."³ What keeps us from letting our guard down with Jesus? Is it fear of judgment? Jesus offers us forgiveness instead. Is it fear of shame? Jesus offers us a new life instead. Is it that we don't want to give up the way

³ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/two-tombstones-the-story-of-the-samaritan-woman-and-jesus-christ-11582592.html>

we're living, preferring to indulge in our pain and sin rather than come out into the light? To that Jesus offers, "If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water."⁴

5 Max Lucado finished his story of the tombstone in this way:

For some of you the stor[ies of Grace Llewellen Smith and the woman at the well are] touching but distant. You belong. You are needed and you know it. You've got more friends than you can visit and more tasks than you can accomplish. Insignificance will not be chiseled on your tombstone. Be thankful.

But others of you are different. You paused at the epitaph because it was yours. You see the face of Grace Smith when you look into the mirror. You know why the Samaritan woman was avoiding people. You do the same thing. You know what it's like to have no one sit by you at the cafeteria. You've wondered what it would be like to have one good friend. You've been in love and you wonder if it is worth the pain to do it again. And you, too, have wondered where in the world God is...

There are two graves in [these stories]. The first is the lonely one in the... Cemetery. The grave of Grace Llewellen Smith. She knew not love. She knew not gratification. She knew only the pain of the chisel as it carved this epitaph into her life. Sleeps, but rests not. Loved, but was loved not. Tried to please, but pleased not. Died as she lived-alone. That, however, is not the only grave in this story. The second is near a water well. The tombstone? A water jug. A forgotten water jug. It has no words, but has great significance-for it is the burial place of insignificance.⁵

Can we be honest with the God who knows us? We can do that by God's grace alone, returning again and again to listen to the indwelling Holy Spirit and to lay down our lives at the foot of the cross of Calvary. Our true significance comes not from who we are and what we do or don't do. It comes from whose we are. This week, find a time and a place where you can have an honest conversation with Jesus. And then lay your burden down and take a long drink of the living water Jesus will give you.

⁴ John 4:10, The Message

⁵ <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/two-tombstones-the-story-of-the-samaritan-woman-and-jesus-christ-11582592.html>



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...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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