Strangers in the night: John 4:5-42

Only one who loves you knows your deepest desires.

by Richard Lischer in the February 24, 1999 issue

A stranger approaches Jacob's Well at high noon. He is tired and thirsty. There he meets a woman who has come to draw water. Something happens between them. . . . The original readers of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman must have felt themselves on familiar ground. The scene and characters would have awakened resonances to another wellside story, a romance, lodged deep in the community's memory: In Genesis 29 the sojourner Jacob comes to a well at "high day" where he beholds his kinswoman Rachel and, Genesis adds dryly, her father's sheep. He waters the sheep. "Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud." Boy meets girl; boy kisses girl; boy and girl eventually (with a huge assist from Leah) create a family of tribes, the children of Israel. That's the way a love story is supposed to turn out.

In John's version, of course, the story takes a very different turn. From the first sharply spoken word, the conversation assumes the character of a confrontation that is charged with a significance surpassing romance and the making of babies. He is a teacher from above, brimming with heavenly wisdom; she is a woman of the world who by now has become hardened to the jokes in her village. Like Jesus, she too is thirsty, but thirsty for something she cannot name. What could these two have to say to one another?

The story is an example of John's use of irony. Irony requires two levels of reality or two types of discourse as well as an unbridgeable gulf between them. One of the parties in the conversation must be clueless as to the discrepancy, which lends a certain pathos to his or her attempt to discover the truth. It is like a conversation between George Burns and Gracie Allen or Oedipus and the blind seer. It is occuring on two separate frequencies. Finally, there must be an audience, like a Greek chorus or a Christian choir, alternately entertained and horrified by this failure to communicate.

Of course, there are ironies, and there are ironies. There is the irony of impenetrable darkness like that of the high priest who says, "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people," but hasn't a clue to the truth he has just uttered, or like that of Pontius Pilate who asks "What is truth?" but doesn't recognize it standing before him in chains.

There is also the irony of those who are struggling in the night but who are genuinely seeking the dawn, of those who are thirsty but cannot say for what. This sort of irony leads to some false starts and comic misstatements, but eventually a path to understanding opens before it. Thus when Jesus offers the woman "living water," she replies that he doesn't even have a bucket to draw with. But when she hears of the water welling up to eternal life, she understands enough to say, "Sir, give me this water . . ."

The comic relief comes to an abrupt end with Jesus' second command, "Go, call your husband." Without the awkward details of the woman's sexual history, we would have only a Gnostic dialogue of truth and enlightenment. With them, we have the reality check that saves all our lives.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman turns out to be a love story after all, for only one who loved you knows you as you are and not as you pretend to be. Only one who loves you knows your deepest desires. Only one who loves you can look at your past without blinking. After a sermon on abuse, a parishioner said, "I never thought I'd hear *that* in a Christian church . . . Thank you." When something terrible in us gets brushed by the love of God, that's all we can say: Thank you. We Christians know a lot about real love, not make-believe love, but only because "he told me everything I ever did."

Like our Samaritan sister, we too have struggled to believe and have made some tragicomic missteps in the process. Like her, we are comfortable with the words of religion, but we sometimes fail to connect them to the living Lord. We speak easily of salvation but quantify it, if not in buckets of water, then with blessings you can carry to the bank. We have elevated listening to the self to an art form of Proustian proportions, but we do not listen to the one who can tell us everything we ever did. We make the family a substitute for salvation, as if we had never heard of God's family, the church. Most of all, we love life itself and expect our technology to make it extremely fulfilling-if not in this millennium, surely in the one to come.

At the conclusion of the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, most readers would have expected the hero to ride off on a white horse in view of a few baffled Samaritans or, like a prophet or a Greek hero, to be taken to heaven in a fiery chariot. But instead, the One from Above chooses to submit to the way of the cross. With near unbearable irony, the Keeper of Living Waters will say to Roman and Jewish spectators, "I thirst." But once he is dead and pierced, out will flow blood-and water.

Our story contains too many double entendres and ironic twists for me, or anyone else, to exhaust its meaning. Let me leave the last word to that master of double meaning, the poet and preacher John Donne, who concluded his final sermon with this sentence: "There we leave you in that blessed dependency, to hang upon him that hangs upon the cross." There we hang, gentle reader, awaiting Easter, the dawn, and the most hilarious irony of all.