

## If You Only Knew

Preached FCCW, March 15, 2020

Text: John 4:5-42

Back in 2004, a guy named Frank Warren had an interesting idea for an art project. He made up some postcards that were blank on one side and on the other side were printed with his address and a simple invitation. The invitation was this: "You are invited to anonymously share a secret. Your secret can be a regret, fear, betrayal, desire, confession, or childhood humiliation. Reveal anything—as long as it is true and you have never shared it with anyone before. Then mail it to the address on the card."

He passed out a maybe few dozens of these postcards in neighborhoods around where he lived. It wasn't even close to being enough cards. Some 15 years later, strangers are still sending him cards, and from all over the country. Frank created a website called [postsecrets.com](http://postsecrets.com) where he shows pictures of the cards that come to him, updated on a weekly basis. You can go there and check it out for yourself. Some of the secrets will make you laugh out loud. And some of them will break your heart.

Whatever the original goal of the project may have been, one thing it certainly succeeded in doing is to prove that just about everyone is carrying around a secret inside themselves that they've never been able to share with another human being. And for them, [postsecrets.com](http://postsecrets.com) has been a safe place for finally releasing those secrets under the protection of anonymity.

It would seem that most of us have secret wounds and doubts about our own intrinsic worth. We put our best face forward while all the time thinking to ourselves: "If you only knew this about me... you would never look at me the same way again." When those kinds of thoughts become lodged deeply within us, they crystallize into shame. Shame is a sense of powerlessness over our negative feelings about ourselves. Shame isn't the same as guilt. Guilt is remorse over something we have done. Shame is not about what we do, but who we are. Guilt tells us the truth that we make mistakes. Shame tells us the lie that we are mistakes.

Shame is a chronic sense of being different from everyone else and concluding that the difference we feel would make us unacceptable and unlovable if we let it show for the world to see. Shame almost always makes us hostages to the secrets we can't bear let the world know about us.

On a hot and dusty journey through the territory of Samaria, a weary Jesus rested by a well while his disciples went into the city to purchase food for them all to eat. Samaritans and Jews both came from the same family tree, but over the centuries they had grown apart, to the point that in Jesus' time Jews did not associate with Samaritans.

So, when a Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water, she was surprised to find a Jewish man there, and even more surprised when he asked her for a drink of water. She said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus answered her, "If you only knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." I wonder if the woman had trouble keeping a straight face as she pointed out the obvious—that the well was deep, and this presumptuous stranger didn't even have a bucket to draw out any water to give her.

Then Jesus asked her to go and get her husband. She gave a terse reply. "I have no husband." She doesn't volunteer any more information than that. But Jesus knows the secret she is guarding with her silence. Which is that she has had five husbands and is now living with someone she's not married to.

The history behind this secret may have been that she had been such a failure as a wife that five husbands had divorced her. That would most certainly mark her as a toxic partner. Another possibility was that she might have had five husbands because each one of them had died and left her a widow. That's the kind of bad luck that can tag you with a reputation of being under God's curse.

The story says that it was noon when she came to the well. That's unusual because the best times for gathering water were in the morning and evening when it was coolest. Carrying a heavy jug of water in the burning noontime heat was something you avoided, unless you were trying to avoid something worse than the burning sun. Like the gossip of your neighbors.

And now—somehow—her past was an open book even to this stranger. There was nothing left of her which she could hold onto and whisper to herself, "If you only knew" because Jesus revealed to her that he already knew all about her. Knew more than any ordinary stranger could possibly know about her.

He had all the ammunition that he needed to shame her; the way she had been shamed so many times before. But he didn't. Instead, Jesus treated her, perhaps for the first time in her long lonely life, as if she was a person rather than somebody's property. He spoke gently to her. "Whoever drinks water from this well will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water I give, will never be thirsty. This water will become a spring of eternal life in every person who drinks it."

She quickly figures out that he isn't talking about the kind of water that comes in a bucket; not the sort of water that comes from a hole in the ground. But possibly the water that can heal the hole in her soul. Who could supply this living water but a prophet? Who could know the depths of her soul the way that she knew the history of this well, but the Messiah? But would the Messiah really show kindness to a woman with a dysfunctional past like hers? She had to know. So, she boldly stated her idea of what the Messiah must be like. To which Jesus replied, "I am

he, the one who is speaking to you. His answer confirmed the woman's wild suspicion of who he was, and knowing who it really was that spoke to her, suddenly allowed her to see herself for who she really was.

The Christ is the one in whose presence you know who you really are, and need not be ashamed of it, no matter what secrets you bear. Jesus is the one who accepts you as you are and not as you pretend to be; who truly loves you when you have forgotten how to love yourself.

To be fully known and fully loved and accepted is what we all thirst for. This is the living water that Christ offered to the woman at the well. It is the water that is available to us. To drink of it sets us free from whatever shame we may feel about ourselves. Many of us have drunk from other wells that we desperately hoped would submerge our secrets deep enough that they would never see the light of day. Only the absolute unconditional love of Christ can satisfy the deep-down thirst for being loved just as we are.

I want to tell you about another interesting website. One that reminds me of what being freed from the grip of our "if you only knew" secrets can mean. This one is called [camerafound.com](http://camerafound.com). Camerafound.com is a huge online database of images from lost and found cameras, flash drives and SD cards. It's a place where people can seek and often find images of people and places that they had lost hope of ever seeing again.

At a well in Samaria, Jesus restored a Samaritan woman's image of herself that had long been lost beneath the cards that life had dealt her. Not the image her neighbors held of her. Not the image she tried to project to conceal the shameful image she had of herself. But the image that Jesus saw when he saw through her secret. The image of a beloved child of God.

Jesus invites us to meet him at that same well. Invites us to see our true reflection in the Living Waters of God's love. And, Jesus calls us, his church, to be the well; a place of healing where the thirsty world can come to drink of grace, and thirst no more.