

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Meeting God”

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John 4:5-30

⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink’. ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, ‘If you 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.’ ¹¹The woman said to him, ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get the living water?’ ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?’ ¹³Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give hem will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’ ¹⁵The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.’

¹⁶Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ ¹⁷The woman answered him, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, “I have no husband”, ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!’ ¹⁹The woman said to him ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.’ ²¹Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as there to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.’ ²⁵The woman said to him, ‘I know the Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘when he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ ²⁶Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’

²⁷Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or, ‘Why are you speaking with her?’ ²⁸Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’ ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

I sat alone in the church last Sunday night, waiting for my Fantasy Baseball League live draft. Since I had about 90 minutes before the draft began, I decided to get a head start on this Sunday’s sermon. What could I say about the Samaritan woman at the well and her

conversation with Jesus? I read the passage over and over again. Nothing jumped out at me. What was so special about this Samaritan woman anyway? Sure, Jesus confronted her at the well. Yes, she really didn't know who he was. True, given the circumstance of her lifestyle and background she probably wouldn't have expected the Messiah to be asking her for a cup of water. But beyond these complications, this story seemed rather long, menial, and routine. I wanted something exciting to talk about with all of you. I wanted to present something incredibly profound. I wanted at least twelve minutes of wisdom and enlightenment.

I must admit I was getting tired that night. Sundays are busy days and last week was no exception. There were a lot of things happening- worship, the youth skit, the representative from the Detroit Handbell Ensemble, baptisms, and setting up for the rummage sale, Spiritual Journeys, and finally Confirmation class. I thought of everything that I needed to get done in the week ahead: registration for the National Association meeting, summer vacation plans, the Healthy Church Workshop next weekend, a Board of Trustees meeting, a Lenten class, my tax returns, and a visit to the dentist.

Outside it was raining hard. A flash of lightning startled me and a loud rumble of thunder shook the building. I dialed up the Weather Channel radar only to discover that it was supposed to rain all night. And what was even more depressing- later in the week the forecast called for winter precipitation. Wasn't it now spring? I have had enough of winter!

Yes, it was hard to be inspired last Sunday night. But I really wanted to get started on that sermon. Then I thought of my father who told me during our phone call on Sunday that he wasn't feeling well. I thought of others I knew who were in need of prayer, in failing health or in a trying and difficult circumstance. Such consideration sobered me quickly to the task at hand, preparing to write a sermon that would express the word of God to people who were yearning to hear it.

What could I write? Where would I find inspiration? Perhaps I should pray, I thought. I closed my eyes for just a few moments and listened to the rain pound against the window near my desk. I tried to clear my mind of worldly things and allow God's spirit to wash over me. Just as I was starting to relax, I heard a noise out in the hall. At first I thought it was someone dropping off more treasures for the rummage sale. This late at night? The front door was locked and I hadn't heard it open. Perhaps it was the church ghost that Norm Kubitskey claims he heard late at night when he was cleaning our hallways. I got up and looked out my door, down toward the door. To my surprise, someone was there. It was Jesus. Jesus was in the building with me!

I rubbed my eyes and pinched myself to make certain I hadn't fallen asleep. Was it really Jesus? Yes, it was him. And he was carefully looking over the bags and boxes of rummage that lined the hallway. I was too scared even to speak. Finally to my chagrin, these clumsy words came out, "What are you doing here?" I guess it could have been worse. I could have told him the rummage sale starts Friday. Before he could answer I tried to cleverly recover. "Well, I didn't mean that you shouldn't be here, after all this is a church and most people would expect to see you in church. And then again, you are Jesus, and I guess you could be wherever you wanted to be. Well, you know what I mean. It is just that I wasn't expecting to see you in person. I am not used to getting such a personal response to my prayer."

I was babbling. I am sure he could tell his visit threw me for a loss. But I was concerned about his being there! Was this another sign of the end times? This would teach me to laugh at such nonsense. Was I about to be called to do something extraordinary? Oh no, I thought. I am having enough trouble with the ordinary. Was I being sent on a mission? What would Laura say when I told her that Jesus came to see me and now we have to move again? Maybe I had done something wrong? Perhaps I should confess now and get it over with. But confess to what?

Finally Jesus broke his silence. "Nice shirt," he said. I looked down at my long sleeve Detroit Tiger 2006 American League championship shirt.

"Thank you," I answered. "My wife bought it for me."

"I know," he said. "She picks out most of your clothes. She loves you very much. You must think about her whenever you wear something special that she has given you. It has to be wonderful to have someone like that with whom to share your life. I am certain that is a source of constant support. I'm sure that you see her as a blessing and never, ever take her for granted."

I nodded my head in agreement. "That's right," I muttered. Who was I to argue with Jesus? Then it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps I really hadn't been so appreciative of Laura lately. I had met Jesus just a minute ago and I was already telling little white lies. I sensed he already knew the truth. Yet he smiled and put me at ease. "Let's go for a little walk," he said. "Show me around the place. Let's go into your sanctuary. Oh, I'm sorry- you Congregationalists call it your Meeting House."

Jesus and I walked down the hallway toward the Meeting House. I followed him, still in disbelief. When we entered the room I hit the light switch. I proudly pointed out the beauty of the place- the organ, the communion table, the balcony, and the windows. Instead Jesus seemed more interested in the pews. He rubbed his hand over the back of a bench. "You know, I've been in here before," he said. "Lot of times. I've spoken with many of the people of Meadowbrook Congregational Church in prayer. I have wiped the tears of some of you who were mourning a loss of a loved one. I have held the hand of some of you who were concerned about your health. I have sat beside families celebrating a Christmas Eve reunion. I have smiled at babies you have carried down the aisle at baptisms. I sing once in a while, even up there with your choir. I sat up in the balcony once, beside a little boy squirming in the arms of his parents. I have stood beside a nervous layperson, called upon to give a sermon when you were on vacation. Speaking of sermons, do you remember that one a couple of weeks ago, the one you thought was just awful? Do you remember the after worship a couple people said that marvelous sermon touched their hearts? Well, I helped you with that Art. Just a little. Let's go and take a look at your education rooms."

We walked out of the Meeting House and back down the hall. Jesus suddenly stopped in front of the Christian Education bulletin board. "You've got some wonderful children in this church, don't you," he said. Again I nodded my head. I told him about our Sunday School, about our wonderful Director and volunteer shepherds and teachers. I mentioned how I so enjoyed the children every Sunday as they make their way down the aisle for the children's sermon. As we entered the Fellowship Hall I proudly pointed out the posters that the children had made for the Michigan Animal Rescue League. Jesus seemed pleased. He said, "You have a couple of beautiful girls yourself, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," I answered proudly. Then immediately I thought of all the times I had lost my patience with my own daughter and lashed out with angry words or ignored them with indifference.

"It must feel special when they want to talk to you. It must feel really great when they ask you for advice that only a father can give. Have you given them a big hug lately? They're not too old for that! I know they have gotten older and it may seem like they don't need you as much anymore. But they respect you. They need to know you care. Remember that."

I invited Jesus to go back to my office to view my latest photos of Maren and Amelia. Jesus just laughed. "I know what they look like. Beautiful girls, like their mother." As we started walking toward the Christian Education wing he added, "I know what all the children in your church look like. They are all beautiful. I love their songs, their prayers, their questions, and their sense of wonder. I love their energy. Sometimes I get the urge to join their Sunday School classes or youth activity. It is great just to laugh and play with them."

As we walked toward the Pilgrim Fellowship room, I suddenly became aware of the incredible nature of this opportunity. My mind began churning with all sorts of questions to which I needed an answer. I should ask Jesus about something important, maybe something about solutions to human conflict or deadly disease. I should ask him about why there is hunger and poverty. I should ask him about the validity of modern biblical scholarship. Or maybe I could at least ask him how Meadowbrook Congregational Church could pay off its mortgage immediately.

Before I could decide what important issue to address, Jesus reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. I suddenly felt strengthened, a bit more at peace. "I know this is a difficult time for you. The world is a frightening place. There is a lot of pressure for everyone. The economy is uncertain. You are worried about you wife and her work, the church and its future ministry, your daughters and their future work and schooling. I know your congregation has been extremely gracious to you. They respect your leadership. They value your wisdom. I know that ministry is difficult work at times. People get weary of volunteering. Budgets are always tight. There can be disagreements and misunderstandings. Even the best ideas might fail. But please let everyone at Meadowbrook know that I am always there with you when you gather in my name- at work and play, at worship and prayer. Always. I usually arrive in a time and manner you might not expect. Most of the time you probably can't even comprehend my presence. But I am there. I hear your prayers. Your hymns and anthems please me. I laugh along with your time of fellowship. I share in the labors of your service." Then Jesus paused for a moment. He winked his eye and said, "Believe it or not, I have even sat in on your Board of Trustee meetings from time to time, right there beside your chairperson."

Jesus looked around the Pilgrim Fellowship room. "This place appears to have a lot of life," he said. "I really love the Detroit Tiger paint." I was thrilled that he knew the colors of my favorite team. He continued, "I heard that you were a pretty good pool player in seminary. What don't you rack them up and we'll play a game?" I put the pool balls in place on the table. Jesus said, "To give you a chance, I'll let you break." I picked up a cue stick and took careful aim. I suddenly felt a great deal of pressure. I pulled back the cue and sent the cue ball down the table. Upon impact, the other balls went flying to various locations on the table, two of them directly into the table's pockets. I leaped into the air and pumped my first, laughing with joy. I had never done that before. Jesus said, "Hey, you are even better than I heard. It was good to hear you laugh like that. That kind of laughter is important to me too."

He again put his hand on my shoulder and looked me square in the eye. "I have to leave now. And you need to get back to work on the sermon idea. Some awfully good people are counting on your preaching some important words." I wanted him to stay. We hadn't even finished our game. "Will you stop by again? Soon? Maybe for next week's Lenten Bible Study? How about Maundy Thursday? I could use your help at the Visioning and Discernment Meeting on the 31st!" You see, I was really getting desperate.

He nodded his head and replied, "Just remember the same thing I asked you to tell your congregation. I am always there. I am the living water. It is not as hard to find me as you might think. I flow through the river of your life. Don't focus on the high and holy places. And don't let the busyness and worry of life overcome the pleasure that God has created for you. Look for me in the kind of experiences we shared together. Seek me in life's interruptions. I will always find you- if you take the time to ask for me."

With that he made his way back into the hallway and out the west doors of our building. I stood at the door waving and shouting a hearty goodbye. Jesus paused for a moment and shouted back at me, "Art, go write that sermon now."

I could and I did. I wrote a terrific sermon about the Samaritan woman at the well. I wrote about how Jesus revealed himself to her in a vivid yet unexpected way. I wrote about how in that surprise intrusion in the midst of her ordinary life, she suddenly became free to release her worry and uncertainty, to be the person God created her to be. I wrote that sermon.

I'd love to preach it to you. But I have already taken too much of your time today. It will have to wait. Someday, I'll have to preach it for you.