

## **GOD'S FACEBOOK**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

September 9, 2007

Scripture: Psalm 139, John 4:7-18, 27-29

The Internet has changed the way people introduce themselves to one another. I have married one couple who met through an online dating service, and I know a couple here at First who met that way. Someone has said that one in seven marriages today begins with an introduction made on the Internet. I don't know how you gather data like that, but the person who told me this factoid is a seminary professor, well educated and informed, a woman who met *her* husband on the Internet.

Of course there are dangers in getting acquainted online. Not all is as it seems. We've heard about the Internet hookups that have gone bad. The child molesters who pose as children and lure kids into inappropriate and dangerous meetings. And in a milder vein, many a disappointing opening of the door has followed an arranged date online.

I can't imagine what it would have been like when I was a teenager or as a college kid trying to find a date on the Internet. I'm sure I would have lied about myself. That's the thing about the Internet; you can make yourself look better than you are, younger, older, trimmer, more muscular, shapelier, blonde instead of brunette. Better yet, don't even use a picture. You can say you're a vegetarian, or a non-smoker, or love reading Proust, and it may all be a lie, because on the Internet you can be whomever you want to be, say whatever you want to say about yourself.

Internet facebookes like MySpace and YouTube are like that. They let you create any persona you want. And there is no accountability or responsibility for the truth of the matter except in meeting.

One of the reasons people are so frantically looking online for one another is because the technology is there and it's easy. It's easier than going on dates. It's easier than the awkwardness of being introduced by friends to a fix up that is clearly not a match. It's easier than actually getting dressed up and going out and making the effort to socialize. Rejection is no fun, and the Internet makes it easier to reject and to survive rejection because the next click on the mouse may bring you someone better.

But underlying the ease of using the Internet is a deeper need to communicate with others. Because we all long to be known and to know another, we are a generation in search of connection.

This is not new, however. Ever since Adam woke up in Eden that morning with all the beautiful trees and plants, and flowers and sunshine and the flowing river, and delicious fruits and the wonders about him that God had made and found that he had no one to share it with, Adam felt lonely. That first Adam wanted to share this beauty with someone else. He felt a longing to hold another's hand in his hand, and express with his body the desire to celebrate the gift of being alive, to overcome his loneliness by joining physically, carnally with another. Ever since that day we have longed for company.

There is solitude and there is loneliness; solitude being the more welcome of the two, because in solitude we rest and refresh our spirits, hear our thoughts, and connect with the deepest center of our lives. Solitude is much to be desired. To paraphrase Thoreau, one can count on it... the person who has two cell phones on his hip, a pager in his pocket, the one who is constantly pecking at his Blackberry and checking for email, has not heard this long while from himself.

“It is not good that the man (or the woman for that matter) should be alone,” God said so long ago, looking at the first of loneliness he had ever seen. And he was right.

We long to know and to be known. We yearn to know that in the great vast universe of things, while we are but a speck, we are a speck that knows that we are here. Just lie out on a summer’s night at the beach or on the dock of some lakeside mooring and look at the vast array of moon and stars above you and you have that sense that the Creation is so great, while the sum of all that we are is so small.

For all of our longing to know and be known, however, we are also haunted by a lingering suspicion, the reason, in fact that on so many facebook people misrepresent themselves. It is the suspicion that if we were really known, if all that we are were revealed no one would love us, no one would accept us. There is within us a lingering suspicion that we are not enough, that we have baggage, that we are flawed in some way, not adequate, and if anyone really knew us deep inside they might just run away.

How brave, then are the words of the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm. We have used Michael Morgan’s rendering of this psalm in our reading this morning. It begins,

Thou O Lord, hast searched me and known me,  
When I rest and when I rise;  
Not a single thought I cherish  
Is kept secret from Thine eyes.  
Ev’ry word my lips would murmur  
Needs no speech to make it known;  
All I do, ere it be started,  
Is as done to Thee alone.<sup>1</sup>

The amazing thing that our faith teaches us is that we are known, we are seen, we are understood by the One who made us intricately in our mother’s womb. One who knows us through and through and loves us still and all. This is the God whose love was made known in Jesus Christ. God’s love is the love that will not let us go. The hound of Heaven that seeks after us even when we try to run away. God is One who seeks our face, and knows our heart, and loves us always.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta’s private letters were published a couple of weeks ago, and many people were shocked to read of her doubts. This woman who cared for so many homeless, ill, and dying people in one of the most crowded and poverty stricken populations in the world is known for her compassion and for her ability to touch the lives of so many people with practical, hands-on help.

She wrote to one priest, some years ago, “Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.

She was acutely aware of the discrepancy between her public persona and the person inside who struggled with faith and doubt. She wrote, “The smile is a mask, a cloak that covers everything.” And to another person she wrote, “I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God – tender, personal love. If you were there, you would have said, ‘What hypocrisy.’”<sup>2</sup>

And therein lies the rub. Sometimes God knows us even better than we know ourselves. The harsh judgments that we ring down upon ourselves, the doubts and fears have a more compassionate hearing with God than with us. Is there anyone here, after all, who would begrudge Mother Theresa her doubts? Anyone who has not struggled with the same conflict of outward appearance and inner anguish?

If anything, knowing that one such as she who struggled mightily with faith, nonetheless carried on, gives me strength to do the same.

God is, after all, the One who seeks our face, and knows our heart, and loves us always.

Sometimes the world tells us that we are not enough, not adequate, flawed in some way that is irretrievable. Howard Thurman, that eloquent African American pastor and teacher and philosopher, writes of his experience as a young black man growing up in Florida in the early part of the last century. He knew the injustice judging a person on the basis of appearance, in this case, by the color of his skin, rather than seeing what is on the inside. He writes of entering Morehouse College in the early 1920’s.

Thurman’s words...

Our manhood, and that of our fathers was denied on all levels by white society, a fact insidiously expressed in the way black men were addressed. No matter what his age, whether he was in his burgeoning twenties or full of years, the black man was never referred to as “mister,” nor even by his surname. No. To the end of his days, he had to absorb the indignity of being called “boy,” or “nigger,” or “uncle.” No wonder then that every time Dr. Hope [at Morehouse] addressed us as “young gentlemen,” the seeds of self-worth and confidence, long dormant, began to germinate and sprout.<sup>3</sup>

God is, after all, like some wise teacher who sees more in us than we see in ourselves, the One who seeks our face, and knows our heart, and loves us always.

The Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus met that day in what is the longest recorded conversation in scripture, is perhaps the most telling illustration of all.

In their exchange, she and Jesus talk to one another in the heat of the day at the village well, where people met for discussion, women at one time of the day, men at another. So the very fact that Jesus encounters her at all at midday like this, in front of God and all the world to see, is a bit shattering in and of itself.

As their conversation unfolds, they talk about drawing water, and water that springs to eternal life. They talk about why he, a Jew, would even bother talking with her, a Samaritan, for the two clans had little to do with each other.

They talked about God, and where God is worshipped, whether in Jerusalem or on Mt. Sychar, and eventually they talked about her. And Jesus told her everything she ever did, as she later described it to her neighbors; her five husbands and her live in boyfriend, and the abuse that she had suffered at the hands of them all. Her reputation in town was nothing as you can imagine, because the victim is sometimes blamed for the crime.

In the exchange, something happened between Jesus and this Samaritan. This woman met One who saw in her a better person than she ever saw in herself. And he named it and affirmed it in her.

For God is, after all, the One who seeks our face, and knows our heart, and loves us always.

We come to this table today as a table of welcome. Where regardless of who we are, or what has gone before, or how we view ourselves, God promises to meet us. Here the one who seeks our face, knows our heart, and invites us to partake.

We've put out our best, and set the table, and there's room for you. Come as you are, because as-you-are is just fine. At this table you may well be feasting with sinners yet seated with saints, because in God's facebook, that's how we all look, welcome, forgiven, redeemed, made whole. For God is the One who seeks our face, and knows our heart, and loves us always.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Morgan, **Psalter for Christian Worship**. Louisville, Kentucky: Witherspoon Press, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes are from **Time** magazine's article "Mother Theresa's Crisis of Faith," by David Biema. August 23, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Thurman, **With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman**. Harcourt Brace, San Diego, 1979. 36.