



## I MYSELF DID NOT KNOW HIM

John 1:29-42

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As you may recall, John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin. In fact, he jumped for joy the first time he met Jesus...even though he was not born yet! Scripture tells us that when Mary arrived to visit Elizabeth, John leapt for joy in his mother's womb. With this enthusiastic meeting in mind, our passage this morning challenges our interpretive powers with a rather odd encounter – or rather encounters – between John and Jesus, that in one way or another is repeated throughout the gospels.

One day, while John is presumably hanging out with his own disciples, Jesus walks by. He does not run over to greet his cousin but instead tells his disciples, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." This is in reference to John's discovery that Jesus is the Son of God. He learned this when the Holy Spirit rested upon him during baptism.

This same event, complete with Jesus and John failing to speak to each other, happens again the next day while John makes the same declaration, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!"

To make the scene even stranger, he tells his disciples not once but twice, "I myself did not know him." But we know they knew each other and, certainly, his mother spoke of Jesus for she was equally enthusiastic upon learning of Mary's pregnancy. Furthermore, apart from the moment of baptism, Jesus and John never interact except by intermediaries.

Since we presume that John did, in fact, know Jesus, then we must conclude that he meant that he did not *truly know him*, that he did not realize *who* Jesus really was until he saw the Spirit of God rest upon him.

And, it seems, there is something about this knowledge that makes John act very differently

than other faithful believers in the New Testament. Others with the same faith sit at Jesus' feet to listen to his wisdom, come on their knees begging for forgiveness, seek healing, or follow him for the rest of their lives, like Peter did. But not John. Even when his cousin, Jesus, walks right passed him, he does not welcome him with a warm embrace.

John keeps his distance.

Historically, the church has interpreted John's actions as part of his calling to ministry. His role was to prepare the way for the Lord and as Jesus grew in prominence, he was meant to fade. But fading was a problem. Perhaps not so much for John directly as for John's disciples. We find the two sides arguing with each other, engaging in minor power plays, and the Pharisees trying to stir up trouble by telling John's disciples that Jesus' team is baptizing more people than John's team. It seems that petty politics in the church has been around since the very beginning. Certainly, it is true that John's ministry was meant to fade, but I wonder if his actions are better explained through a more human lens, which leads us back that phrase, "I myself did not know him."

John's need to repeat this twice in the same conversation means that this realization was significant for him. He knew Jesus; he was his cousin. He knew Jesus as the Messiah, for his mother certainly would have told him. Yet John continues to have this internal struggle about **TRULY** knowing him.

But, unlike Peter who wrestles and argues with Jesus who does not truly know him but stands toe-to-toe with him, John processes on the inside. Peter has a similar problem as John. But Peter confronts Jesus. Peter tries to correct Jesus. Peter pledges eternal loyalty one moment and then turns tail and runs to hide as soon as things get difficult. Then

later is back again at the tomb seeking him out. But John needs time and space. In fact, we know he spent much time in the wilderness away from people. Not that he didn't love people. He just couldn't always be with them.

Perhaps you know people like this. Perhaps you *are* like this. You sit back and listen. You need to spend time alone to process your interactions and your thoughts. You struggle expressing them to others and you wonder why in the world people always need to talk!

It almost seems to me, that John's words are an internal dialogue,  
*I, Jesus' cousin,  
I, who knew the stories from birth,  
I, the one sent to pave the way for him,  
sent by God no less,  
I did not know him, not really.*

Most surprising about John's struggle to know Jesus is John seemed to have an exceptional gift. In an instant he could read people. Through his baptismal calling he could see their hearts. So when crowds came to him wanting a baptismal shortcut, he called them on it – "you brood of vipers." And when Jesus, his cousin was baptized, he saw the spirit of God rest upon him and knew right then, "That's the Son of God!"

So if John the Baptist, the one with the special gift didn't know him... How can I, how can you, ever expect to know him?

Who is Jesus?

This was bothering John right up to his death. When John is in prison awaiting his fate, he sends a disciple to speak with Jesus. He does not ask for help. He does not ask for a miracle rescue. He does not ask for prayers to give him strength. John is a man not focused on his own needs. You all have known people like this. They never think about themselves, only their job, only their calling. No matter what struggles they endure, they don't want any attention. It is their duty to God, family, and friends that drive them, even to their death, if

necessary, and John is ready – but there is something weighing on him.

So, even after leaping in the womb; after seeing the Spirit of God resting upon Jesus at his baptism; after declaring twice, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world", John still needs to know!

*Are you the one!?*

Are you the one who is going to bring peace on earth?

Are you the one who is going to teach us to love one another?

Are you the one who will fix all this hate?

Are you the one who will heal my loved one's terrible disease?

Are you the one who is going to help me find purpose and love?

You see, John's struggle is the same frustrating and life-giving struggle for us. We begin with some understanding of him. Jesus was a Jewish man born 2,000 years ago who is the Son of God. At first, we believe that is enough. But as time goes by, we realize there are things we don't understand about this Christ.

It's something like our parents. When we are young, we know them as providers and caregivers. The ones who help us when we are sick, buy presents when it's our birthday, and discipline us when we act bad. But we don't know them, not really. It is only as an adult that we come to appreciate who they are fully – and truly – apart from the role as our parent. We come to know them as a person (shock! they really are people).

As you have heard me share, most of my conversations with my father consist of either sports, Karl Barth, or liberation theology – which for me was great. He never talked about himself, nor anything personal. From this you might conclude I did not know him very well.

As you also know, my father loves golf. He played regularly for 60 years. And he was good. He claimed club championships on three continents. It wasn't

until he turned 80 that I could finally win on occasion.

You might think this was an elite thing about him. That he spent time with certain types of people.

But his favorite partners were two African American prison guards who were self-taught, who played cross handed! The people whose names he knew and spoke to after the matches were the groundskeepers. As I was growing up, that taught me more about life and more about my father than any 20 sermons I ever heard.

Jesus understands John's struggle. So, he does not give platitudes. He does not remind him of his eternal nature but his actions. His actions that tell more about him than any impressive title or florid description,

*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*

As Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." And indeed, that is how we come to know, truly know, our Lord. Perhaps in John's heart of hearts he knew. But he just needed to hear the words. To be reassured once again, that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords – to hear it and to know it in a different way. And once John heard it, he was ready to do anything for Jesus.

Amen.