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A few years ago, when I last said mass at Gonzaga Prep, I used my old 1980's click wheel ipod to play Paul Robeson's rendition of "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho." It happened that among the people at that mass was a man whom I taught when he was a student at Jesuit High School in Portland and who is now the father of a girl at G Prep. After the mass, he asked to see my ipod and when I showed it to him, he laughed in disbelief and asked, "Does that thing still work??!!" I told him that it had been one of my most prized possessions for years. Back when I was still me, I spent a lot of time running, biking and lifting weights, I even ran the first Spokane Marathon in 1984. Back then, being able to go for a bike ride, or to the gym, and take every one of my cd's and audio books with me in a machine smaller than a pack of cigarettes was a great gift from our post-modern, godless, machine-dominated age.

Now, ---even though my marathoning days seem to be long gone, I still get lots of mileage out of this reliable old device since I do try to get out and walk a mile every afternoon when the snow and ice aren't too ominous. One of the aspects of i-poding that I

like the most is “Podcasts,” those sometimes bizarre, homegrown recorded talk-shows which can be found all over the internet. I subscribe to ”The Borgo Pass Horror Podcast and the “Greatest Movie Ever,” in which guys who I am sure spend way too much time in their parents’ basements record and broadcast their insights about movies like BILLY THE KID MEETS DRACULA, I WAS A TEENAGE FRANKENSTEIN, and WEREWOLF IN A GIRLS’ DORMITORY.

Recently, I have been catching up on podcast called “Shakespeare-upon-iPod.” I’m not sure why I listen to it, since its major focus is a topic that I generally find silly: The podcast’s primary purpose is to prove that the plays of Shakespeare were not written by Shakespeare but by a man named Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford.

I think Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare’s plays, but I have to admit that the guy who runs this podcast has made a few interesting points.

And even though I personally find it silly, Asking “Was Shakespeare really Shakespeare?” is a question that the author of those plays would have found very amusing. Because IDENTITY—who we

are and what that means is a frequently recurring theme in Shakespeare's plays.

Shakespeare's Comedies find a wide variety of ways different ways to pose the question: "Who Are You?" Whether it's confused identical twins in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, girls dressed up as boys in *As You Like It* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, people pretending to be or to feel things they aren't or don't, like Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, or just flat-out phonies-to-the-core like Cressida in *Troilus and Cressida*, or Angelo in *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*, Shakespeare's comedies always turn on some point of confusion or deception of characters about the identity of the people whom they think they love and who they think love them.

Shakespeare examines the concept of identity even more fully in his Tragedies when he changes the question from "Who are YOU?" to WHO AM I? ----In nearly all of Shakespeare's tragedies there's an odd moment near the end when the hero stops and identifies himself by name, usually to other characters who've been listening to him ramble away in iambic pentameter for the last 2 and a half hours.

When Hamlet leaps into the grave of his girlfriend Ophelia after driving her to suicide, he shouts, “Tis I, Hamlet the Dane”—I guess so that Nobody will mistake him for Magnum P I; Coriolanus is killed in the last scene of his play arguing with an angry mob about what his name is. When I played Macbeth back in my glory days, one my favorite lines came in Act V when a young English soldier burst into the throne room and demanded, “Who are you?” and I got to respond with the great line, “My name’s Macbeth.” Before killing him in a swordfight. The tragic heroes re-identify themselves at the end of their plays, I think, because through the crucible of the suffering they bring down on themselves and those around them they finally learn who they really are.

I think today’s Gospel shows us that our understanding of Jesus is much like that of Shakespeare’s comic lovers of each other and his tragic heroes of themselves: It is very different at the end of the play than it is at the beginning and that change can only happen if they work their way through the story of the play.

The fifth century Christian philosopher and mystic whom Theologians now call “Dionysius the Areopagite” emphasized the inability of human understanding to grasp the reality of God. We cannot “understand” or “comprehend” God, Dionysius said, because there is no possible way to make God’s infinity “stand under” or be held within our limited minds. We can attain limited, imperfect, fragmentary insights into aspects of God’s reality, but we have no more chance of mentally grasping the Reality of God than a dachshund has of understanding all the jokes in ALL’S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

Throughout his Gospel, John shows us people like the Woman at the Well in today’s Gospel who come haltingly, imperfectly, and humanly to limited understandings of who Jesus is. They all fail to grasp Jesus’ identity fully, but through the fact that their limited understanding of Jesus does develop slowly, painfully, and imperfectly, John gives all of us who move toward Jesus in the same flawed, stumbling way great comfort in knowing that we’re not alone.

This pattern begins in Chapter 3 of John’s Gospel in the story of Nicodemus the Pharisee who comes to

Jesus in the dead of night. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to leave behind all the categories in which he has tried to define God throughout his life and be “born again” to a new, humbler understanding. Nicodemus’ initial response is: “How can a full grown man re-enter his mother’s body and born a second time? That’s ridiculous.”

The Samaritan Woman today met Jesus when she came to draw water from the well of Jacob which had no spring, but just collected water from rains or that seeped in from underground. So when Jesus talks about “udor zo-ein”—“living water”—she thinks he’s talking about fresh water flowing from a spring or in a stream.

Near the end of the John’s Gospel in a dramatic reading that we will hear on Good Friday, Jesus tries and fails to help Pontius Pilate realize that he and Pilate understand the term “King of the Jews” very differently.

The people who meet Jesus in John’s Gospel all understand a piece of what Jesus is trying to say, but none of them ever completely understand what they are encountering in Jesus, but whether it’s Pilate failing to see that being “King of the Jews has

nothing to do with Roman politics or the Samaritan Woman moving from seeing Jesus as a Jew, then as a prophet, and finally as the Messiah-- all them develop deeper, but still imperfect understandings of Jesus—until their own limitations prevent that understanding from developing further.

And, once again, I take great comfort in that because that sounds a lot more like my personal journey of faith than does the image of Peter, Andrew, James, and John just dropping everything they're doing and trotting off behind Jesus (although I DO find great comfort in the fact that after that they do that they make almost every single mistake they conceivably could in following Christ.)

Jesus works with these people like Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman the way he works with us. He meets them as unique individuals—Nicodemus in the dead of night and the Samaritan Woman in the blazing noonday sun. He is as open to the Samaritan Woman, who probably would have been scorned as a “floozy” by all the nice church-going folk on her block as he is to Nicodemus and to Pontius Pilate—the highest political authority in Judea.

Like a good teacher, Christ is patient with all these scriptural people who don't understand him because it's good practice for dealing with 2000 years' worth of dealing of disciples who won't understand him.

We don't come to understand who the Trinity is, or who Jesus is, or who we ourselves are in a moment, or a week, or even in 40 days of Lent.

Understanding who God is and who God is calling us to be is the work of a lifetime. And whether that life is as virtuous as Nicodemus' or as colorful as the Samaritan Woman's, Christ is willing to wait for each of us to find him in our own way.

Today's first Reading from Exodus reminds us that the Israelites had to wander in the desert for forty years before they understood Yahweh well enough to be able to enter the Promised Land. The Apostles stumble around the Gospels like the Three Stooges with fishing nets until the enormity of what they experienced in Jesus finally dawns on them at Pentecost.

In most of Shakespeare's comedies nobody really knows what's what or who's who until the very last scene. Shakespeare's great tragic heroes do not understand what it is in themselves to that drives



them to destroy themselves until that destruction is almost complete.

Many of the Saints and many of us experience a similar dynamic in our relationship with Christ. We hope to approach Christ differently on the fortieth day of Lent than we do on the first. And we hope that our relationship with him is deeper in our fortieth Lent than it was in our fourteenth. And we hope that we can be as patient with each other and with ourselves as Christ is with us. Until we ultimately realize that he accepts us just as he accepts the Woman at the Well even though he knows “everything she ever did.”