

“Virginia Herbers brings to life the nameless figures who prominently feature in Scripture and interact with Christ. Her effective and affecting invitation to encounter anew these important, if anonymous, people renders them and the lessons they offer in a provocative, contemporary, and meaningful way.”

— Kerry Alys Robinson, Global Ambassador of the
Leadership Roundtable

“While some may shrink from tackling the vexing questions and challenges of the human condition, Virginia Herbers courageously dives in with zeal. Relying on scholarship and imagination, she probes the complexities of biblical stories with refreshing honesty. The frank and candid manner in which she relates her own life experiences with those of the unnamed biblical characters makes this work pure delight to read.”

— Annmarie Sanders, IHM, Communications Director,
Leadership Conference of Women Religious

“Some writers convey deep spiritual and theological insights. Others are entrancing story tellers who can bring the Bible to life. It’s rare to find both abilities in the very same author. Reading *Gifts from Friends We’ve Yet to Meet* is like swapping family stories with your cousin on a warm summer evening, both of you laughing and drinking good wine and learning things that will make you a better person.”

— Paula Huston, author of *The Hermits of Big Sur*

“Through her skillful storytelling, Virginia invites us to weave the stories of nameless Gospel characters with our own story. Blending the tools of Scripture scholarship with insights gleaned from her own prayer and lived experience, she opens space for each of us to encounter a God eager to walk with us, eager to encourage us through the people placed along our path, friends known and those we’ve yet to meet.”

— Kristin Matthes, SNDdeN, former chair of the National
Religious Vocation Conference Board

“Virginia Herbers is a gifted teacher and storyteller—and just the right person to take us on a personal tour of some of the New Testament’s lesser-known characters. From the Canaanite woman to the crucified thief, Herbers writes about these biblical figures as though she’s met them—and indeed she has. Prepare to make some new friends—including Herbers herself—and receive the gifts they have to offer in this decidedly original, gently humorous, and deeply insightful book.”

— Amy Ekeh, Director, Little Rock Scripture Study

“Through the tender and vulnerable stories of her own life, Herbers introduces us to the tender and vulnerable people of the Gospel, who in turn introduce us to the One who consecrates all our stories.”

— Mark E. Thibodeaux, SJ, author of *Ascending with Ignatius*

“Virginia’s writing style is so personable and draws you into her life and the lives of these biblical friends. Virginia encourages us to be bold yet humble when coming to the Father while challenging us to remain soft and compassionate for those hurting. If you are looking for a book to inspire and challenge you, this is it.”

— Dedee Lhamon, founder of The Covering House

Gifts from Friends We've Yet to Meet

A Memoir of Biblical Encounters

Virginia Herbers



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*To my beloved parents, Vincent and Janette Herbers,
who first taught me what God's love looks and acts like*

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Introduction

“What’s your name again?” I always feel just a little stung when I realize I am unknown to someone I thought would remember me or upon whom I thought I had made a good impression. As the youngest child in a very large family, I grew up as one among many, part of the pack. I admittedly got more than my fair share of special attention being the youngest of thirteen kids (seven years younger than the sibling closest to me in age), but it was also a common occurrence to be called the wrong name by parent, teacher, pastor, or coach. Of course, there were occasions when this anonymity worked to personal advantage, as in the day when my mother, turning her back just long enough for me to get a forbidden mouthful of raw cookie dough, cried out with exasperation, “Rose, Joanie, Matthew, O child of grace, what is your name?” Usually, though, I desired recognition and personal affirmation much more than anonymity and interchangeability.

Having an experience of being unknown can hit a hollow spot in the soul, dropping like a stone and hitting with a soft but certain thud in the least secured landing of the heart. The feeling of being forgettable is one that requires a type of spiritual reckoning. In the gospels, the frequent occurrence of unnamed individuals is striking, even as their role in the life and ministry of Jesus is undeniably crucial. “The woman” at the well, “the friends” of the paralytic, “the centurion” whose faith heals his servant, “the demoniac” who recognizes Jesus as the Son of God: all are but a few of the dozens of gospel characters

who figure prominently but anonymously in the life and mission of Jesus, even while others (such as Zacchaeus, Tabitha, Jairus) are named directly.

Scripture scholars have written much about the significance of those purposely named in the gospels as well as the social, political, and religious structures that would have prevented those same writers from naming others specifically.¹ Although these matters are intriguing to ponder, they are not the question of this book—our query is not academic or theological but personal. It is a question that affects *us now*, in relationship with *them then*. What is the role of the nameless figure (or collection of figures) in the life of Christ? What does it mean to be anonymous in the story of our God? Isn't God the one who calls us by name and knows us even before we are born? What does it mean to play a meaningful role in the story of our God and yet still be unidentified in that story? Isn't this a fear we each hold somewhere deep down, in a soul-place that is almost too vulnerable to access?

Have you ever worried that your life is not remarkable enough, important enough, or holy enough to get God's attention? Have you ever wondered if, when push comes to shove, you will be claimed by God? The worry might sound something like this: "Sure, God created me and gave me life, so of course God knew me in the beginning, when I was innocent and good. But at the end of my life, after everything I've done, will I be claimed by God? Does God remember me even now? Would God still choose me? Do I truly matter to God? When I pray, does God actually listen? Does God really know and care about what is happening in my singular little life? Maybe

¹ For a brief but delightful jaunt into this issue, I recommend Bruce M. Metzger, "Names for the Nameless," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t120/e0515> (accessed 08 Oct. 2020).

I won't make the cut in the end simply because I haven't done enough with what God has given me. Maybe I will have made such a mess of my life that God won't even recognize me."

(If your answer to these ponderings is "I've never really worried about things like that," then meeting the characters in this book may take you on a wild new adventure exploring faith and doubt, hope and fear.)

It seems that even the most devout of believers often harbors the same nagging questions: *What am I worth to God? Does God truly know me—the real me—and love me anyway?* We readily profess the head-answer to these questions: "Of course God knows me and loves me." But the soul's answer is not so simple, and even the saintliest of the saints have struggled with it.² Our very existence is evidence that God knows us and wants us; we can only exist because God has loved us into being. This we know and believe intellectually, but as our lives unfold, being known by God and being loved by God somehow cease to be felt as certainties for a lot of us. We begin to wonder whether our lives of faith are so unremarkable that we might find ourselves standing at the gate of heaven at the end of our lives only to hear him say, "What's your name again?"

Have you ever found yourself speaking with a customer service representative on the other end of the line who actually went out of her way to solve your problem with effectiveness and genuine kindness? Have you sat on a plane and discovered that the life of the person next to you intersected with yours in some inexplicable way? Have you heard a stranger make a random comment that was somehow a perfect insight into your life?

Encounters like these, with complete strangers, can change the direction of our attitudes, our behaviors, or even our very lives. When I was seventeen years old, I went to Australia over

² Perhaps the most well-known reference when we speak of these kinds of questions is St. John of the Cross and his "Dark Night of the Soul."

Christmas break to visit my sister, and I was plagued by the question of what to do with the rest of my life, convinced as many teenagers are that my lifelong happiness rested on the singular decision at that point in my life: where to go to college. I sat on a short stone wall in a decrepit church parking lot, all alone in a city and continent unknown to me, pondering the big life questions of meaning, choice, and vocation. Whether I wore the weight of the world on my face or not I can't say, but what I do know is that I was wishing that my granny, the wisdom figure of my life, was still alive because I would have laid out for her the entirety of my existential dilemma. She would have listened carefully before giving me her advice, and then I would have trusted her insight and judgment, knowing its source was nothing more or less than unselfish love. I sat on that Australian stone wall for about twenty minutes ruminating on possibility and longing, so caught up in the demands of my destiny that I didn't notice a middle-aged woman walking my way. I have no idea what her own world held that day, but when she walked past me, an unknown American girl sitting in her neighborhood, she looked at me, smiled, paused for just a moment as she walked past, and felt compelled to declare, "Darlin', you're going to be just fine. Trust your instincts." That was it. No greeting, no question, no introduction. Just that little statement with no explanation. I had been too stunned to even ask her name. An anonymous stranger, whose role in my life was fleeting but meaningful, offered to me that day the exact thing I needed. She couldn't have loved me—she didn't even know me—but her words struck to the core of my spirit, conveying the very compassion, wisdom, and love I needed in that moment. To this day, I call this life-changing character in my life my "Sydney granny." I wish I knew her name, but even without it, her place in my memory and in my life's journey remains undeniably meaningful.

So here are some more questions for us to ponder: What significance might an insignificant encounter have in the greater narrative of our lives? Who are the "anonymous

figures" you've encountered who have played a critical role in your life? How do the experiences of the nameless gospel characters, whom we will never be able to specify in prayer or story, continue to reach and teach us today, not just in spite of their anonymity but actually *because* of it? Can it be that their anonymity allows for their experience to be not only personal but also universal? If we read a story from the gospels about Peter or Thomas or Judas, it is, of course, personal—between Jesus and that person. We can glean meaning and relevance from the story and the interaction, but somehow the experience remains historically fixed, allowing us to keep something of an easy distance from its impact. It doesn't necessarily feel universal in scope; it can easily feel specific to the person engaging with Jesus. But if I read a story about Jesus and "a boy" or "a woman," I have to contend with the question "What if that were me?" Gone is the luxury of letting myself off the hook because I'm not St. Peter, whose story and actions I can readily verify from source material, whose discipleship is trackable and thus not necessarily in sync with my own. Suddenly but subtly I myself have to *reckon* with every anonymous encounter on a personal level. I read it from a centuries-old Bible, and even though the interaction in the gospel story was certainly personal for the unnamed individual, it now also becomes personal for me. That which took place in Israel two thousand years ago crashes into every "here and now" since, making an ancient experience applicable to each person who reads it anew in his or her own circumstances. Anonymity thus becomes both personal *and* universal, and anonymous characters become our friends. Even without proper names, these folks share their stories with us and allow us to claim our place within those stories. They are dear friends we just haven't met yet, and each of their ages-old encounters with Jesus contains a gift for you and for me—today.

Did the gospel writers intentionally leave some of the characters in their narratives nameless so that we might insert ourselves in their place? That might be a stretch, but the fact

of the matter is that these gospel friends we can't name had a role to play then, and I believe they have a role to play today, not just in the reading of Scripture but, maybe more importantly, in the application of it to our own experiences. Just like my Sydney granny, each of these people reminds us of who we are and who we can become in order to live more trustingly, more authentically, and more joyfully on this adventure called the Christian life. Let's get to know some of them a little bit better and see what gifts they might be offering us.

Chapter 1: Love Waits

A Gift from the Rich Young Man

Now someone approached him and said, “Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?” He answered him, “Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He asked him, “Which ones?” And Jesus replied, “‘You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother’; and ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” The young man said to him, “All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

— *Matthew 19:16-22*



I’ve always felt kind of bad for this “rich young man.”¹ He was so eager to be good, so ready to ask, “What else can I do?”

¹ Matthew doesn’t specifically use the characterization “rich.” We only read in v. 22 that he “had many possessions.” He does, however, characterize him as “young.” Interestingly, neither Mark nor Luke refer to him as young, but both characterize him as “rich.” See Mark 10:17-22 and Luke 18:18-23.

I have known this feeling of enthusiasm, this desire to do more for God. And I have likewise known that in asking the question “How can I do even more for you, God?” the response I really hope to hear is a commendation, a pat on the back, something along the lines of “More? Heavens, you’ve done just fine as it is. Well done, my good and faithful servant! All that’s left for you to do is wait for your eternal reward.” Instead, Jesus answers the youngster in the story (and me, too, I imagine), “Oh? You don’t just want the basic material; you actually want the honors class *and* the extra credit? Well, now you’re talking!” Beyond that, he tells him that “the honors class” means giving up, giving over, and giving in, and then—*then*—coming back and saying yes to the role of lifelong discipleship. I can almost envision the young man’s shoulders sagging, crestfallen that Jesus took him at his word and actually asked *more* of him than he was already doing. I have also known this feeling! My articulation of it runs along the following lines: “Dang. I was hoping I could have the prize without having to do anything *that hard* to get it.”

It seems that this could have been the story of the calling of the thirteenth Apostle had the rich young man accepted Jesus’ invitation. But his response was to walk away. The fact that the story ends here actually allows for the possibility that perhaps eventually he did become one of Jesus’ disciples. My favorite theological speculation is that he is actually the “rich man from Arimathea named Joseph” who shows up eight chapters later in Matthew 27:57 to provide the newly hewn tomb for the body of the crucified Christ. That is, however, only speculation, and so in his namelessness (i.e., lack of historical verification), we are left to wrestle with the question of his choice—and thus also our own.

When I ponder the personal relevance of this encounter and take stock of my own “many possessions,” I have to ask myself if they prevent me from saying yes to God’s invitation to follow him more closely, more personally. I might not have

possessions that amount to much in terms of wealth, but I shouldn't lull myself into the belief that I therefore am not "rich." What are the "many possessions" that I have, that *you* have? For me, I would say, first and foremost, books—so many books. The handwritten journals that I have kept over the years—over twenty volumes, actually. Music of all kinds. Digital files (ugh—let's not even talk about those). Pictures. Did I say books? These might not seem much like "possessions" to anyone else, but let me make two points.

First, these things have accumulated over time, and they represent my education, my leisure time, my hobbies, my work, my talents, my relationships—all things born out of and developed because of a certain degree of wealth and privilege, particularly when they are recognized as the outcome of opportunities that have been available to me that are unavailable to the vast majority of my brothers and sisters around the globe.² I, like the young man in this scene, am rich.

Second, it is important to distinguish riches from possessions. I know many a wealthy person who will give generously of their riches without a second thought; they are not possessive of their wealth and their wealth doesn't possess them. Likewise, there are things we have that, although not valuable from a monetary point of view, we cling to quite possessively. An example of my own is time. How generous am I with my time? How much do I weigh the request for it before I give it away? Do I deem some people more worthy of receiving it than others? Do I hoard it? Do I spend it only for my own purposes, or am I willing to "give it to the poor," as Jesus instructs? In reading this gospel passage, I know immediately that one of my "many possessions" is my time—it possesses me more than I possess it. If Jesus looked at me and my schedules and

² A few statistical examples worth pondering include the finding that less than 7 percent of the world's population has a college degree and more than 60 percent lack internet access. For more information, see <https://www.100people.org/index.php>.

calendars and asked me to surrender all of it in order to follow him more closely, I wonder how eager I would be to do so. Would I also go away sad, ruminating on how unreasonable his request was? Would I think, “What would happen to all the commitments I’ve made, the people who are counting on me, my responsibilities”?

Point of fact: God *does* ask me to do this—often! Once when I was sitting down to meet a swiftly approaching deadline for a column, my phone rang and I picked up the call from a friend, thinking it would be a quick two-minute hello, ending with my promise to call back when I had more time to chat. Instead, I was met with sobs on the other end of the line. When she was finally able to tell the story, it was one of tragedy, the sudden loss of her sister on the anniversary of her father’s death. “Can you come?” she asked. I am embarrassed to admit that, for as good a friend as she was to me, I hesitated. Despite the fact that I did go immediately after hanging up, that first hesitation was not negligible. There was the “cry of the poor” on the other end of the line—unmistakable, needy, urgent—and there I was, weighing it against my own personal time and agenda.

As I compose this chapter, I do so from the isolation that COVID-19 has brought to our world. Talk about having our life’s plans and timelines interrupted! The entire human race is struggling with the effects of being *forced* to change our plans, our expectations, our priorities. We are being force-fed a lesson in letting go of the control we thought we had. I, for one, have not received it with the saintly acceptance and gratitude that I wish I had, but I certainly do recognize the invitation being offered from God: *Let go. Control has always been one of your preferred illusions anyway. Give your plans to me. Let me have them.*

Life with Christ rarely syncs well with calendars and schedules. “Kairos,” or God’s time, is distinct from “chronos,” chronological time. Kairos is the time it takes for a piece of fruit to become ripe or the sense you might have at family dinner that the right time to raise a difficult issue has come. It

cannot be scheduled, predicted, or controlled like *chronos* can. God's *kairos* is what shows up most frequently in the Scriptures—everywhere from his appearance to Elijah as the “tiny whispering sound” (see 1 Kgs 19:12) to Jesus' launching his public ministry in Cana where, incidentally, his mother Mary sensed that it was his time to “get going” before Jesus did (see John 2:1-12).

God doesn't work on our schedules, grace doesn't come on command, and the cry of the poor isn't heard according to a predetermined itinerary. Personally, I might prefer adding in “mystical experiences” and “spiritual works of mercy” to my regularly scheduled programming so that I can ensure that they will be convenient, sanitary, and socially acceptable. But the fact of the matter is that I am in for a surprise when I come to prayer at the end of the day saying, “Hello, Lord. Today I have honored my father and mother, refrained from bearing false witness, and not stolen anything. What more can I do for you tomorrow?” God might just answer me the same way Jesus replied to the rich young man: “Well, how about you take the rest of the month's agenda and toss it; then, open your eyes and ears to the spontaneous needs that I keep putting right in front of you?” I guarantee my response would not be an automatic “OK, great! Thank you so much, my great God, for choosing me, your humble servant, for these opportunities!” It would be, I confess, more steeped with protests about long-standing appointments or important meetings or maybe with mild panic about how to manage the uncertainty of such a life. I might even become defensive about the impracticality and disrespect of not abiding by other people's needs and schedules! First, I'd likely go away sad, and then I might stomp around, a little bit mad. I am the rich young man, and he is me.

The story of either the rich young man or me, whichever you'd prefer to entertain, needn't end there, though, despite the fact that the Scripture passage does. He goes away sad, but does he ever come back again? Do I? Would you? The namelessness of this rich young man becomes an invitation to us,

and we are asked to replace his anonymity with our reality and give an answer. Today. Now. Maybe it's not pretty. Maybe it's the same answer he gave: drooping our heads and walking away sad, mumbling excuses for why it inevitably has to be this way. Just like his story, though, ours needn't end with that initial response.

I believe there is a hidden lesson about God in the life snippet of this rich young man, and it is this: Love waits. We are left in the gospel with the man's sad departure, but Jesus' invitation stands, and it is up to both our imagination and our own life choices to determine whether or not a return ever occurs. Maybe I go away sad and then become mad for a little while, but then what? *Then what?* One thing I believe pretty certainly is that the rich young man couldn't unhear Jesus' invitation, couldn't unknow the call to discipleship. Sure, he could work to forget it, try to dull the memory or numb the pain of having refused the invitation, but encountering Jesus is not one moment among many in a person's lifetime. Encountering Jesus is definitional. I can't help but believe that the echo of Christ's invitation resounded in the heart and mind of this young man until he simply couldn't ignore it any longer. Perhaps there was a second definitional moment—the moment of decision and ultimate response *after* he went away sad. Did he stop resisting the steep price tag and ultimately decide to “give it all away,” or did he instead determine once and for all to silence the invitation's echo, settling for living a “good enough” life?

It would not be unreasonable to imagine that he might have chosen to focus on just the first part of the conversation, remembering Jesus' affirmation with regard to all the commandments he had kept throughout his youth. After all, Jesus was clear in the first part of his response. What the rich young man had done “from his youth” (Mark 10:20) was exactly what God requires, Jesus said. That feels like a pat on the back; that feels like affirmation. “Good for you!” Jesus seemed to say.

But in the actual event, the conversation didn't stop there. So did he choose to remember only that he had asked a simple question and gotten a simple answer at first, considering that "good enough"? Or did his memory of the second part of the conversation haunt him, forcing him to battle his internal rationalizations? Might he have finally given in to that tormenting memory, ending his resistance to Jesus' invitation to sell all? Isn't it possible that one day later he did indeed decide to surrender, responding to Jesus' call to "come, follow me" in discipleship?

What our imaginative prayer tells us about the rich young man reveals what we need to know about *ourselves*. The rich young man went away that day, but Jesus stayed, loving him still and always. And I believe he waited. Love waits for us to opt in.

At my childhood home, our backyard consisted of a concrete patio, a garage, and a grass patch only big enough to grow a few tomato plants. To maintain some degree of sanity in the hot summer months for both adults and children, my parents purchased a family membership to a local swimming pool. Dad would often pile at least some of his thirteen children into the station wagon after dinner to spend a few precious hours enjoying summer evenings at the pool, giving my poor ragged mother a break. One of these nights stands out very clearly in my memory.

I was almost five years old, and I wanted to experience the same kind of reckless abandon that I observed in my older siblings as they ran headlong to the edge of the pool and hurled their bodies (or some other sibling's) into the water. I hadn't learned how to swim well yet, so I wasn't allowed in the deep end, but I wanted to at least jump into the shallows like my demigod siblings instead of cautiously walking down the steps holding my dad's hand.

I must have expressed this desire aloud because my sister Clare, eight years my senior, took it upon herself to help me.

She stood in the three-foot-deep end of the pool with outstretched arms and promised, "Go ahead and jump. I'm right here." Excited and eager but frightened as well, I paced back and forth along the edge of the pool, considering the prospect. There she was, my trustworthy older sister, ensuring that I would be OK, encouraging me to trust, waiting for me to be ready. And there I was, pacing and deliberating and stalling. I remember taking a long time to make the move, and I also remember Clare's long vigil from inside the shallow end, arms open to catch me. She was the embodiment of "love waiting."

"You're going to pull me up if I go under?" I asked.

"Yes."

Think, approach, squat, worry.

"What if I can't touch bottom?"

"You've been in this end of the pool before. You'll be OK."

Nod, approach, crouch, stall.

"Is it really cold?"

"Nope."

Stand, inspect the scab on my knee, observe the ants on the sidewalk.

"Virginia, are you going to jump or not?"

"Maybe I should just use the steps."

"Whatever you want," she said as she dropped her arms. (As I recall this memory now, I am in awe of how patient my twelve-year-old sister was with me. She remains, to this day, one of the most patient human beings I believe God has ever created.)

"OK, I want to jump," I resolved.

"OK." Arms back up.

Crouch, tense, prepare, delay.

"It'll be OK? You're going to stay there and catch me?" I fretted.

More firmly now: "Yes, already!"

And then, at the thought that the opportunity might disappear, I stopped catastrophizing and jumped, landing anticlimactically with an understated *sploosh*.

Love waits. Through our fear and worry and even delay, it waits. If a twelve-year-old big sister can keep vigil at the side of a swimming pool with tired arms, just imagine what God can do, even when we “[walk] away sad.” When we fear and worry about the choices before us, what does God do? It seems, both in the story of the rich young man and in our own stories now, that God waits. He respects our ability to say no—and our potential to eventually say yes. He waits, knowing that for as real as the “no” might be, the I’ve-changed-my-mind-I’m-coming-wait-for-me “yes” is all the sweeter.

Did the rich young man come back to Jesus at some later date? I’m one of those who believes he did.

I have absolutely no memory of anything at the swimming pool after my famous summer jump except that I did indeed survive and don’t think I ever used the stairs again. My guess is that in finding the experience—and my sister—trustworthy, all the fear leaked out of it and I moved on to bigger and better things—jumping into the deep end, off the diving board, and then, eventually, off the back of a boat into open waters. Fear is a deceptive thing. It looms so large, rattles such noisy chains, wields power too big for words. What was I fearing from the edge of that pool? Death or injury? I don’t remember, but I doubt it was that dramatic. If I was anything then like I am now, I was probably fearing the unknown and the untried.

What was the rich young man fearing or resisting in the face of Jesus’ invitation? Maybe the same thing: the unknown and the untried. “What will happen?” “Will I be OK?” “What will this cost me, and can I really give it all up?” Those aren’t questions just from him; they’re our questions, too. “Can I do this?” “Is it worth it?” “What if . . .?”

Love waits for us to decide, allowing the last syllable of our protest to fade away, keeping vigil until we take one last deep breath and choose, finally, to jump.