

February 24, 2008  
The Third Sunday in Lent

“Boundaries”

John 4:5-26

*So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.*

*A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus 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." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."*

*Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."*

Sermon

You and I tend to put a lot of boundaries around ourselves, both physical and virtual. We have fences, property lines and even this understood area around our body that we call our “personal space.” Those boundaries are more or less obvious and simple. Then we have our more difficult to discern and much more complicated boundaries. Often we like to deny they are there, but we know they exist. There are economic boundaries; homeless people typically aren’t welcomed at country club soirees. We establish social boundaries early on. In high school I remember invisible but very discernable lines between the brains, jocks, burnouts, drama geeks, etc. And even though we may struggle against putting up boundaries based on race, religion, nationality, age and any number of other things, it seems those walls just kind of happen anyway.

Last Sunday our Gospel lesson from John told us the story of Nicodemus, a very respectable Pharisee and Jewish leader came to Jesus at night and was told that “*unless someone*

*is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” Then Jesus went on to point to Himself as the Son of Man who must be lifted up that those who believe in Him would have eternal life. Not a lot of boundaries in that story; respectable Jewish leader speaking to an emerging maverick of a Jewish Rabbi.

In this week’s Gospel reading we have a much different encounter by Jesus. This time it’s not a respectable Jew, but a Samaritan; one of a people considered a half-breed and despised by the Jews. This time it’s not a man, but a lowly woman, a gender no self-respecting rabbi would be seen conversing with. And it isn’t a righteous and upright Pharisee, but a sinner, an adulteress, who many biblical scholars believe is at this well alone because even the other Samaritan women don’t want to have anything to do with her. And this woman doesn’t even properly worship in the temple at Jerusalem, but worships God at a rival site on Mt. Gerizim. In speaking to this woman Jesus crosses through any number of boundaries; gender, nationality, race, religion.

Furthermore, unlike Nicodemus, this woman isn’t reaching out to Jesus at all. She is there to fetch some water and you can be sure that she had no intention of having anything to do with this Jewish man standing at the well. She recognized all the invisible boundaries that stood between them and she wasn’t about to breach them. She knew that although they were only a few feet apart, a barrier of culture, religion, gender and nationality stood between them, and the fact is that she was probably more than happy to let them stand and go on about her life. If anything, the nearness of this man the was so foreign to her in so many ways likely made her very uncomfortable and she wished he would just go away.

Jesus, of course, knows all of these boundaries that stand between them. He breaks through them. *Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”*

Surprised, she points out his faux pas, *“How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?”*

Jesus doesn’t care. He has more important things to speak of. The barriers have no meaning for Christ. He speaks of the same gift for this sinful Samaritan woman as he did for the upright Pharisee Nicodemus. He speaks of water that leads to eternal life. *“Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*

When Jesus is able to point out her sins, she perceives him to be a man of God, a prophet. She seizes the opportunity to question a theological barrier standing between Jews and Samaritans—the competing worship sites of Jerusalem and Mt. Gerizim. Jesus proclaims that very soon that barrier also will be brought to naught.

*“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.”* And then Jesus reveals to this woman that he is Messiah, the Christ. And following our reading, the woman spreads the word and soon many Samaritans come to faith in Jesus and say to her later in verse 42, *“It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.”*

Jesus Christ broke all those cultural and social and religious boundaries to reach out to the foreign Samaritans. But those were all divisions separating sinful human beings apart from one another. Crossing those lines was a small feat compared to the barrier he would soon break down on the cross. There he broke down the impenetrable barrier that stood between sinful

mankind and righteous God. He bore the weight of that wall, of its punishment, allowing himself to be crushed by its weight—the wrath of a just and holy God.

And with that debt paid and that wall of sin between man and God laid flat, Christ reaches out with his Holy Spirit through His Word and invites forgiven sinners to join Him in the kingdom of heaven. No barriers, no divisions, no boundaries; just His invitation to receive His merciful and gracious gifts and be His beloved children.

Yet, the not-so-funny thing is, while Christ tears down all the boundaries between us and Him, we seem to be bent on putting them back up. Think about it carefully. Aren't their parts of our life, major or minor, that we seem to want to border off from God? We all struggle with this. It could be something as mundane as our TV time. We struggle to live in God's kingdom the whole week but for just a few hours we want to put that wall up and keep God out while we indulge in a voyeuristic pleasure of being entertained by programming no Christian should find entertaining. It could be something as major as money. We say "God, my life is yours, but my cash, well, I'm walling that up in a vault where you're not allowed." Sometimes we make every effort to be God's child in our personal life, but once we step into our professional role in business, well that's the dog-eat-dog world and there's no room for love or God and neighbor. We have to throw up a wall between us and God and go to work.

The fact is we like to throw up walls around the sins we like to keep. Lust and infidelity—real or imagined. Greed and avarice. Gossip and slander. Alcohol or drug abuse. Sins of thought or sins of deed. We have this nasty tendency to think we can set a boundary around a certain sin and raise it up as a god one place in our life, yet behave and be an obedient child everywhere else. And the real danger is we might start believing that's good enough.

It's not. It's an all or nothing thing. God can't be blocked by any walls we throw up. He sees our sins, all of them. These shameful thoughts and deeds we really would like to keep covered and keep out of God's sight all lie exposed. We can't hide them.

Don't try. The living water Christ speaks of washed us in our baptism and washes us every day...every bit of us. There is no barrier or boundary strong enough to keep Christ's forgiveness away. There is no sin that stands horrible enough to withstand the deluge of His love. That dark sin you're especially ashamed of, it's not outside of the grasp of His mercy. Take these sins especially, these sins that seem to plague us with a special attraction, and put them before our Lord and ask Him to wash their guilt away. Know that they don't stand as a wall between you and God, but are leveled by Christ's intercession for us. Ask His Spirit to be that spring welling up within us to give us strength to fight their temptation. In all things know that Christ has gifted you with the faith that recognizes that He is Messiah, that Jesus is Lord of all.

We once stood like the Samaritan woman, separated from God's love by man-made boundaries; man-made sin. But Christ crossed all the boundaries to come and save us. Although we were steeped in sin, he comes and says, "Here, drink," and lets us drink deeply of the His living water, the righteousness he won for us on the cross. Through our Holy Baptism He washes us in water and Word and allows the spring of His Holy Spirit to well up within us. Through the continued preaching of the message of salvation the Spirit continues to flow in us. Through the very giving of His body and blood in the Lord's Supper He again and again lets us know that no boundary of sin is blocking us from receiving Him.

In Christ we are forgiven and stand before the Father full of the Spirit and full of truth. Nothing dark is hidden somewhere inside. The flood of living water from Christ has washed all sin and deceit away. The Father looks on us and sees the holiness of Christ, the purity needed to

stand before a holy God in worship. And through Christ that is what we do, right this moment in Houma, Louisiana and for eternity on the glorious mountain of Lord.

Our loving heavenly Father sent His Son Jesus Christ to destroy the barriers of sin and death and Satan, all those things that stood between us and God. Christ did so on the cross and His victory means we can stand before Him in Spirit and truth, every single bit of us washed clean in the living water of Holy Baptism. Don't seek to again build walls to hide from God in your sin. Through prayer and repentance, daily return to the living water and put your whole self before the flood of His forgiveness. Through worship and the Word, allow His Holy Spirit grow as that spring inside you welling up to eternal life. Nothing stands between you and Christ at this well of living water. Drink.