

God's People in Wilderness: Border Crossings

John 4:5-30, 39-42

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⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) (that's an understatement!) ¹⁰Jesus 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.' ¹¹The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' ¹³Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' ¹⁵The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.' (a left-brained response to Jesus' right-brained explanation)

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' ¹⁷The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' ¹⁹The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' ²¹Jesus said to her,

'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' ²⁵The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' ²⁶Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

27 Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' ²⁸Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' ³⁰They left the city and were on their way to him.

39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' ⁴⁰So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. ⁴¹And many more believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.'

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

We're in the middle of our series on "God's People in Wilderness." This morning we are reflecting on Jesus' encounter with "the woman at the well" as she is called. This unnamed woman of the Bible and Jesus meet in a metaphoric wilderness. It's a wilderness of separation, of racial and religious and gender

differences. And there was likely more going on here to make it a wilderness of isolation for her. So this is less about *our* wildernesses—each of our individual experiences of wilderness—and more about how Jesus crosses borders and boundaries to meet a stranger in *theirs*, and what we can learn from that in *our* attempts to be Christ-like, so we also can meet others in their wilderness times.

What do we know, or notice about this unnamed woman? For one, we clearly know that she is Samaritan. As she approaches Jesus, and he asks for water, she immediately points out the border line between Jews and Samaritans. John the gospel writer makes a parenthetical comment that “Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans,” which is an understatement to say the least! Samaritans were considered half-breeds and mongrels, traitors and heathen. Unsaved and unsavable. Google that history and it will be quite revealing.

In addition to that, we learn some of her personal relationship history (I’ll come back to that in a moment). Further, what we notice, but may not pay as much attention to or gather the importance of, is that she has come to a watering well *by herself in the middle of the day*. That is significant, and tells us something very important about her.

Middle Eastern village women always avoid the heat of the day by carrying water from the village well early in the morning, and just before sundown. For propriety's sake, and safety's sake, they always go to and from the well as a group, never alone. Another reason for going to the well as a group is that the jars that hold the water are heavy when full and are very difficult for a person to lift onto their head by themselves.

So, because this woman comes to the well in the middle (and heat) of the day, by herself, it tells us that she has been excluded from the social fabric of her village, and her community. We don't know why; it's quite possible that she has been shunned, or shamed for some behavior or because she broke some social norm or custom. Maybe she got into a fight with the other women over something. We don't know for sure why she is in this wilderness of isolation.

But a comment is in order, as we seek to understand her:

This narrative is often looked at in terms of the woman's sinfulness. You know, she has lived a life of sin: she has had 5 husbands, and the man she now lives with is not her husband, as is pointed out. But there is no indication from the text that Jesus is convicting her of sin. In other instances where he *is* pointing out someone's sin and shortcomings, he is usually more direct: "Get behind me,

Satan” he says to Peter. That’s pretty direct, I’d say. “Go and sin no more,” and so forth. He doesn’t do that here.

And given the fact that women had no rights in that day, especially the right to choose her husband, or get a divorce, her having had 5 husbands would not have been something that she had agency over, or a choice in.

So, rather than view this woman as someone who has lived in sin, or interpreting Jesus’ words as convicting her of sin, it seems that Jesus is simply naming something. He is pointing out a pattern in her life, that probably represented pain for her; he is verbalizing something that has been kept unspoken, and is bringing it into the light.

Notice that when Jesus brings this to light, she isn’t shamed by it, she doesn’t get defensive, or run away. She acknowledges the truth spoken out loud, and kind of admires Jesus’ insight, and even when she then changes the subject Jesus doesn’t yank the conversation back and say, “Hey, I’m not finished talking about your sinfulness here!” He rolls with the conversation, satisfied that she acknowledged his insight. And they have this amazing talk about living water, and springs of life welling up and overflowing out of us, and Jesus being God’s Messiah.

All of this turns out to be a healing and transformative experience for her! As we see, she is changed as a result of this encounter with Jesus and she becomes an evangelist. One might even say she becomes the first apostle! The first outspoken witness to Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Mary Magdalene is known the apostle *to the apostles*, the first to announce that Christ is risen to Jesus' followers. But here, early on in Jesus' ministry, we have a woman who speaks in apostolic witness to the presence and authority of Jesus Christ to people who don't know who Jesus is.

We hear this text and it's easy to go to, "She's a sinner." But when we consider what life was like for women in that day, it's more accurate to say that she was a product of that culture's failed norms of providing for the powerless and the underserved. Did she make mistakes? Of course! But one innocent mistake on a woman's part, in that day, could create a cascade of effects that send her to the margins of her society, seeking support for herself or a child by agreeing to, or doing, undesirable things, just to survive.

If you know the story of *Les Misérables*—read the book, seen the musical, or one of the film adaptations of the story—think Fantine. Fantine is a young woman who fell under the spell of a charming man who had money, who got her

pregnant and then abandoned her. Fantine then is left to fend for herself and her child Cosette, and is ostracized wherever she goes. She is labeled a sinner, a woman of ill repute, and with nowhere else to turn after getting fired from her job, she resorts to selling herself just so her child can live. Victor Hugo does a brilliant job of showing what injustice and failed religion can do to a person who is actually pure of heart.

So I look at Jesus' interaction with this unnamed woman as a compassionate one, where she needed to be seen. Jesus' question about her husband is not a comment on her marital status, over which she would have had no control anyway. Rather, his words are meant to move her to the next level of understanding of who Jesus is. And it worked! Because the conversation takes a swift turn toward Jesus being the expected Messiah. Which leads to her going back to her village and telling everyone about him.

With all that in mind, in understanding this unnamed woman, there are some surprises in Jesus' actions. I'm calling these border crossings, because Jesus crosses social and religious borders here, as he does throughout his ministry, to meet someone in their wilderness.

I'm indebted to Ken Bailey for some of this insight into our text from his experience of having lived in the Middle East for almost all of his adult life as a professor at the University of Beirut, Lebanon. Ken is a Presbyterian missionary, who took the New Testament to local villages and would talk with locals about Jesus' teaching, parables, actions, and whatnot, and ask villagers to help him understand them better from their cultural context. Here is one of his books: *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. I don't recommend just sitting down and reading it from cover to cover, unless you have trouble getting to sleep. But if you're interested in studying certain passages and persons of the New Testament in their cultural context, this is an excellent resource. Here are a series of surprises:

First surprise: as the woman approaches the well where Jesus is standing, he, as a man, is expected to courteously withdraw to a distance of at least 20 feet to indicate to her that it is culturally appropriate for her to approach the well, but he doesn't. You think 6 feet of social distancing is a big deal? Try 20 feet between male and female strangers in public. The surprise is, Jesus does not withdraw from her as she approaches. In fact, he talks to her. He asks her for a drink.

And therein is the second surprise: Jesus breaks the social taboo against talking to a woman in public. Ken Bailey says that in his over 40 years of life in the middle east he himself never crossed that social boundary line, and he rarely saw anyone else cross it. In village life, he says, a man doesn't even make eye contact with a woman in a public place unless he is related to her or knows her. Jesus broke this social taboo a lot, not only by talking with women but by inviting women into his band of disciples. They financed him and many of them travelled with him, from a culturally appropriate social distance. As we heard in the reading, the disciples are somewhat shocked by this when they come back, which tells us how startling Jesus' border crossing was. It's almost funny: they have questions, but they don't bother to ask what's going on. They're too dumbfounded by what they're seeing. Or too afraid to ask.

Jesus introduced radical changes in the attitudes toward women, and toward others. Which leads to the next surprise:

Jesus spoke with a Samaritan. The woman points out *that* social taboo, which is more accurately a *religious* taboo and an *ethnic* taboo. Jews and Samaritans had engaged in something like an Israeli-Palestinian conflict for 500

years, with violent skirmishes and terrorist attacks and retaliations against each other, and attempts to defile each other's' sacred religious sites.

And what's amazing and surprising here, in this context, is that Jesus says something that goes straightaway against his own Jewish tradition and history and loyalty, and obliterates the boundary between Jews and Samaritans. That is, where is the divine presence to be found and worshipped? And on whose land (holy land or not holy land) is that mountain and temple found, where the presence and glory of God reside? Jesus makes it clear that the worship of God is not about a specific geography, or a temple, one holy city (Jerusalem), or one people group. Nobody "owns" God's presence. It isn't contained in one place. Worship of God is about spirit, and authenticity, Jesus says. It's a matter of heart, and it can happen anywhere. And the fact that Jesus has *this particular* border-crossing, or border-obliterating, mind-blowing conversation with a non-Jew, and a despised non-Jew at that, is remarkable.

As we consider our own discipleship in following Jesus, and being like Jesus in our actions toward others, especially in crossing borders and welcoming the stranger, I came across a quote from Hebrew Bible scholar Jonathan Sacks, that dovetails beautifully with all of this. In his book titled *Faith in the Future* he says:

“The Hebrew Bible contains the great command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18), and this has often been taken as the basis of biblical morality. But it is not: it is only *part* of it. The Jewish sages noted that on only one occasion does the Hebrew Bible command us to love our neighbor, but in 37 places it commands us to love *the stranger*. Our *neighbor* is one we love because the neighbor is like ourselves. The *stranger* is one we are taught to love precisely because the stranger is not like ourselves.”

That’s a good way of looking at Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well. And that got me thinking about neighbors and strangers and who those people are, for us, today. So here are some questions for each of us to reflect on:

- Who is the “woman at the well” today? The stranger—socially isolated, maybe shunned, rejected.
- Where does the stranger, “the woman at the well” reside, or go for their daily needs? And who meets them there?
- Who needs the Living Water of Jesus, but has been excluded from receiving it?

- Are we willing to cross borders? Break some social norms, even social or religious taboos, to have conversations and share our lives with each other, with the goal of communicating the gospel?

Who knows, that these persons could be our next evangelists! I know that our friend Chris Hoke from Underground Ministries would say that some of today's best apostles and evangelists are former gang members. But I won't say any more about that because Chris is going to preach for us soon. So stay tuned, you'll hear more.