

"WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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John 4:4-42 (NRSV)

But he had to go through Samaria. [5] So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. [6] Jacob'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.) [9] The 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.) [10] 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." [11] The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? [12] Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" [13] Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, [14] but 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." [15] The 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."

[16] Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." [17] The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; [18] for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" [19] The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. [20] Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." [21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. [22] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But 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. [24] God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." [25] The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." [26] Jesus 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?" [28] Then 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?" [30] They left the city and were on their way to him.

[31] Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." [32] But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." [33] So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" [34] Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. [35] Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. [36] The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. [37] For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' [38] I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

[39] Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." [40] So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. [41] And many more believed because of his word. [42] They 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."

WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS

Have you ever heard the phrase, “wrong side of the tracks?” In my home town that phrase was literally true. The railroad ran through the middle of the town, and there literally was a wrong and a right side of the tracks. The people on the right side of the tracks were our kind of people. They looked like us. They talked like us. They thought like us.

But, the people on the wrong side of the tracks were different. Many were a different color. They were of a different social class. My parents warned me never to go on that side of town. They said it was a dangerous place. And most of us heeded their warning. We instinctively knew that it was in our best interests to avoid the wrong side of the tracks.

In Jesus’ day Samaria was on the wrong side of the tracks. (Actually, in this case Samaria was on the wrong side of the Jordan River.) People would go out of their way in order to avoid going through Samaria. They had heard stories about how those who were making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem had been harassed and even attacked by those wild and crazy Samaritans.

I’m sure the disciples were amazed when Jesus told them, “We need to go through Samaria.”

The disciples eventually followed Jesus into Samaria, but I wonder if they didn’t protest a bit about the journey. “Jesus, haven’t you heard what happens to Jews who dare to cross through Samaria? Didn’t you parents teach you the dangers of such a trip? Just last week I heard about a man who dared to go into Samaria and he hasn’t been heard from since. Bad things happen when you dare to wander on the wrong side of the river.”

But, Jesus would not be deterred. He had to go through Samaria. The disciples reluctantly followed.

THEOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

Why did Jesus need to go into Samaria? Why didn’t he take the safer route on the other side of the Jordan River? In John’s gospel even geography plays a theological role. Jesus was always traveling to the wrong side of town or to lands where the people were strange and the theology was suspect.

It wasn’t an accident. It wasn’t like he got lost. It was a statement about who he was and what he came to do as the Messiah. Where he traveled and who he talked to spoke volumes about the Kingdom of God and his view of what it meant to be the Messiah. Jesus said that he had come to “seek and save the lost.” Going to the wrong side of the tracks changed things.

I watched a biographical sketch about presidential candidate Hillary Clinton on the History Channel this past week. When asked what motivated her to enter public service, Hillary said that one big influence was the leadership of a minister of youth in the Methodist Church.

She said that he did more than lead Bible studies and plan social events. He actually dared to take his young people to meet other young people in the inner city. They got to know these young people from the wrong side of the tracks. They played games with them. They learned to care about these people who were quite different from her and her privileged lifestyle.

She said that this experience more than any other changed the trajectory of her life. Her commitment to improving the lot of the poor and the working class came from this early foray into another world.

Whether you agree with Hillary or not, I do think that she is genuinely motivated by this early experience. Just going to the other side of the tracks and getting to know people for who they really are can make a big difference in how we view the world and what we do with our lives.

Perhaps the passage teaches us that we too need to make a trip to the wrong side of the tracks with Jesus. Maybe the wrong side of the tracks is the place where we will find something important. Maybe on the wrong side of the tracks we will begin to understand Jesus in a way that was not possible in our own comfortable home town.

In our Presbytery we sponsor short term mission trips. People visit a country where things are much different. There is often a different language, a different culture and a different form of government. There is a different form of Christianity.

And yet despite being in a foreign environment, many participants in this program feel quite at home. They make a personal connection with these people and find that their own faith is deepened. They go back year after year to participate in new mission projects. They begin to see the church and the world in a whole new light.

When we lived in North Carolina our Presbytery participated in a unique border crossing experience. Protestant and Roman Catholic children from Northern Ireland traveled across the “pond” to stay with families in the Tar Heel state. The idea was to break the cycle of violence. The children were placed in a more peaceful environment and were introduced to children from the other side of the troubles.

Many of these children found this to be a life changing experience. And I have to wonder if this program and others like them didn’t finally lay the groundwork for peace. The same kind of program called “Seeds of Peace” is now going on with Israeli and Palestinian young people.

GOING TO THE WRONG SIDE WITH JESUS

Now of course all of these programs represent just a small portion of the people involved. You might rightly ask, “What good is this going to do? The hostility is just too great, and the problem is just too big. What good do our little mission trips do in a country that is overwhelmed by poverty and despair? What good can come from rich kids making a trip to the big city to play and talk with kids from the poorer side of town?”

On our own these incursions across the borders of life won’t do that much. But, when we go with Jesus, when we go across the border because Jesus calls us to go, then I think that possibilities are boundless. Indeed, I think that just as Jesus called his disciples to go to the other side of the tracks, he calls us as well.

Today’s lesson is a case study in evangelism. Today’s lesson is an example of how we can approach those whom we perceive to be radically different from us. So, come to the other side of the tracks with Jesus this morning and learn to see the world in a new way. How did Jesus approach those who lived on the other side of the tracks?

VULNERABILITY

Well, first Jesus approached the Samaritan woman with a sense of vulnerability and humility. It was a hot day. Jesus was tired and thirsty. So he shared that with the woman who was coming to draw water from the well. Jesus said, “I’m thirsty. Could you give me a drink?”

To have a meaningful relationship with someone you can’t come to them with a condescending manner and suggest that you have all the answers. At some level you must say to them, “I’m thirsty. I have a need.” In our shared human need we can often make a deep connection.

The reason some people tend to avoid Christians is that we sometimes are unwilling to be honest and vulnerable about our own needs. The shared weaknesses of the human condition can be a strong bond even among people who have quite different ideas and agendas.

This past week I heard of another peace initiative based upon a common human need. A small number of Palestinian and Israeli women participate in a program called "A Slim Chance for Peace."

These women get together to try and lose weight. They share recipes and encourage each other. And in the process they have learned to appreciate each other in a way that was not possible before. By sharing human vulnerability, they are able to communicate on a different level.

Many growing churches use this approach. They try to identify needs in the community and then try to fill those needs as a way of introducing themselves to the community. They connect with others through a shared need.

I think this is entirely in line with the ministry of Jesus. Though Jesus was the Messiah and God's own Son, he was also a human being who shared our weaknesses and our needs. Some have trouble with the fact that Jesus was fatigued and thirsty. They like to think of Jesus as above and beyond it all. But, I think that the humanity of Jesus makes him an even more compelling figure. Jesus used his weakness, his thirst as a way to communicate with the world.

And I think that this is what Jesus would have us do as well. Try to identify with others on a human level. Find common ground in the fact that all of us are ... in one way or another ... thirsty.

CONFLICT

Second, Jesus teaches us that when we dare to go on the other side of the tracks, sometimes our worst fears seem to be confirmed. We might not be so warmly received, and it will take some work to achieve understanding.

Just as our parents told us not to venture to the other side of the tracks, so parents on the other side of the tracks have told their children, "You can't trust those folks." We are prejudiced toward the Samaritans, and they return the favor.

That's how it was for the Samaritan woman. When Jesus asked for water, she responded with prejudice. It almost sound like an episode from the Sopranos, that TV show about gangsters from New Jersey. Jesus asks for water and the woman replies "Are you talking to me?"

Immediately, she's in his face. She's challenging Jesus on a basic level. She says, "You know that Jews and Samaritans don't talk to each other. You know that men can't speak to women in public. What's your problem buddy?"

This is where many of us lose it. We say, "I told you it was bad idea to go into Samaria Jesus. Look at how this woman is treating you. Let's cross over the Jordan and go back to where people know what it means to have a civil conversation."

But, Jesus didn't take the bait. Jesus didn't respond in kind to the woman's hostility. He meets her indignation with calm assurance. In my experience it is possible to defuse a difficult situation simply by remaining calm and non-aggressive. And then Jesus changes the parameters of the discussion. He said in effect, "We have something more important to talk about than the age old conflict between Samaritans and Jews. I have something to offer you. I have living water."

Now in order to understand Jesus' point it might help to know that Jacob's well was really a cistern. In other words, this well had no underground stream to supply it. It depended entirely upon the collection of rain water.

During the hottest months of the year the well might run dry. I also imagine that, at times, this water since it was stagnant might not have been all that fresh.

We know that Jesus is taking the discussion well beyond water. Jesus is speaking symbolically. Jesus was saying that his ministry would be like flowing water. The coming of God's Spirit and God's truth as revealed in Jesus would change the world. Jesus' ministry would be like a cool drink of water from a fresh mountain stream.

But, just like Nicodemus in our lesson last week, this Samaritan woman misunderstands what Jesus has to say. She seems to take his words literally instead of figuratively. She said, "Oh sure, you've got water for me. You don't even have a bucket to get water from this well, but you're going to give me water that is even better than the water that comes from Jacob's well. What's wrong with you buddy? Do you really think that you're better than Jacob?"

OVERCOMING MISUNDERSTANDING

When you cross over the other side of the tracks you can always expect misunderstanding. Even if we share a common language our assumptions are not always the same.

Think about the way we use language in the church. We often use symbolic theological terms that make sense to us, but the people on the other side of the tracks have a hard time understanding us. It seems to me that our job is to "translate" our faith into language that is understandable.

Jesus does that. He tells the woman that he is speaking symbolically. He's not just talking about flowing water. He's talking about the essence of life. He's talking about the water that quenches all thirsts. He's talking about water that leads to life eternal. He's talking about a life that has purpose and direction.

I think the woman is beginning to understand Jesus, and she wants this life giving water. She is thirsty for what Jesus offers so she responds by saying, "Sir, give me this water."

CHALLENGING OUR OLD WAY OF LIFE

This brings us to a third principle for bringing the message to the other side of the tracks. When human contact is made and understanding is achieved, Jesus is willing to challenge our assumptions. Jesus is willing to tell us that the old way of life is just not acceptable. In order to drink living water, in order to get a new lease on life, the woman at the well needs to come to terms with her old way of life.

Whenever I preach on this passage I remember a song about this passage that my father used to sing. The first line went, "Like the woman at the well I was searching for things that did not satisfy."

According to our passage, this woman seemed to be seeking satisfaction and fulfillment in her relationships with men. It comes out in the conversation that she's had five different husbands. We don't know what happened to husbands one through five, but we learn that she's living with a guy now who's not her husband.

We don't really know why this woman was "unlucky in love" but Jesus' reply seems to suggest that she was putting too much emphasis upon her relationship with guys and not enough emphasis upon her relationship with God.

Sometimes I think we talk too much about this woman's lifestyle and not enough about our own lifestyle. As my father's song put it, we need to look for those areas in our life where we are searching for things that do not satisfy. Are we trying to satisfy a spiritual thirst with something else, something that will in the end not satisfy?

We often eat too much, drink too much and put too much pressure on our relationships with others because we are trying to satisfy a spiritual thirst with a physical answer. It's not easy to talk about those areas of our life where we have failed.

But, Jesus brings it up. Jesus challenges the assumptions of those who think that the good life consists of having what we want all the time. If we want a drink of living water it begins by realizing that the water we're drinking right now is stagnant and unfulfilling.

THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

The fourth principle that Jesus embodies on the other side of the tracks is an unwillingness to be sidetracked by theological controversy. The woman feels vulnerable when Jesus challenges her personal life so she tries to get the spotlight off of her own failures and put the spotlight on theological and political controversies.

She says, "Jesus I see that you're a prophet. Where's the best place to worship, in Jerusalem where you Jews worship or here on this mountain in Samaria?" But, Jesus is not willing to go there. He says, "We do worship in Jerusalem, but the time is coming when the important thing about will not be where you worship but how you worship. The true worshiper is honest to God. The true worshiper worships in Spirit and in Truth."

Having been unsuccessful in trying to engage Jesus in a theological controversy, the woman tries one last thing. She tries to put off making a personal decision. She says, "These are hard theological concepts. But, when the Messiah comes we'll understand all these things." (With the implication being that right now she's just going to go on living the way she's living. Why do now what you can put off until tomorrow.)

But, Jesus doesn't let her do that. Jesus tells her, "I am the Messiah."

This is the dramatic moment in the encounter. The woman has met Jesus, the Messiah, and she has forgotten all about water. She leaves her water jug, goes into town and tells everyone who will listen about Jesus. She thinks that he just might be the Messiah.

REAL FOOD

The disciples miss most of this conversation. They do wonder why Jesus was talking with this woman, but they're afraid to ask.

They had gone into town to buy food, but now they find that Jesus isn't even hungry. And they wonder if Jesus has already found something to eat.

That gives Jesus an opportunity to launch into a symbolic discussion of what really feeds him. For Jesus his food is doing his Father's will, bringing words of healing and hope to the other side of the tracks.

Jesus looks at the other side of the tracks in a different way. Instead of seeing people who are obstinate and difficult Jesus sees people who are ready to hear the gospel. The other side of the tracks is a field ready for harvest. God has decided to do something great on the other side of the tracks.

Jesus' observations prove to be prophetic. The Samaritans are changed. They are changed first by the woman's testimony about Jesus and then that faith is confirmed by a personal encounter with Jesus.

WHO'S ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS?

I wonder what the disciples thought about a whole town of Samaritans believing in Jesus. The people that they had avoided and despised all of their lives were now coming to faith. What did it mean?

It meant that God's grace was greater than they had imagined. It meant that Jesus' message of salvation was not just for Jerusalem and Judea. It was for Samaria too ... and for the whole world. The disciples were beginning to catch a vision that was different and larger than any vision they had imagined before.

I have suggested that we need to travel with Jesus to the other side of the tracks, to that place where the people are different and sometimes hostile to our way of life.

But, what will we learn when we go there with Jesus?

I would suggest that, like the disciples, we will learn that the message of Jesus is deeper and wider than we first imagined. We will learn that salvation is not just for people like us but also for those other people.

And maybe we will learn that all of us live on the other side, the wrong side of the tracks when it comes to salvation. All of us, like the woman at the well are seeking after things that do not satisfy.

But, Jesus crosses over and seeks us out. Jesus comes to us and offers to fill our cup with living water. Jesus comes to us and like the Samaritans we come to know in a personal way that Jesus is our savior and the savior of the whole wide world.

Amen.

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