

“LET’S GET REAL”

John 4:5-26 (p. 1030)

Our job at Westminster is, first, to help people discover how much God loves them through the saving grace of Jesus Christ and then help them grow in their faith so that it finds expression in the way they live. If we’re not about that business then frankly we have no business being in business. Still, I can’t help but wonder why some people have so little trouble coming to faith in Jesus Christ while for others it seems like an uphill battle all the way? I’m sure there is no one simple answer. But there are certainly barriers to faith we can identify. And if we can name them, we can deal with them more effectively. As always, the Bible is our primary reference, and Jesus is our model and best teacher.

In our lesson this morning we can see three significant barriers that Jesus had to overcome before he got through to that Samaritan woman. And while those barriers may seem at first to be peculiar to that time and place, variations on those themes play out in every age and place. First, he faced the ***reality of racial prejudice***. Then he had to ***respond to religious preference***. But the biggest challenge for Jesus, and it’s true for us as well, was in ***reaching the real person***.

1. First, there was the ***reality of racial prejudice***. It was noon when Jesus sat down by Jacob’s well in the Palestinian sun. A local woman approached the well, water jug in hand. Jesus said to her, “*Will you give me a drink?*” She replied, “*You’re a Jew and I’m a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?*” Then John adds parenthetically, “Jews don’t associate with Samaritans.” It’s hard to miss the tension in her words. Maybe she spoke them defiantly, as if to say: “*You’re asking me for help? You’re a Jew. I’m a Samaritan. You’re in my territory. Get your own drink!*” Or maybe the words were spoken incredulously, out of deeply entrenched feelings of inferiority, saying to Jesus in effect: “*Sir, I don’t understand. How can you, a Jew, ask someone like me for a drink of water? We shouldn’t even be talking like this in public. If anything, you should be ordering me, not asking me.*”

It would be just as out-of-character today for an Israeli settler on the West Bank to invite his Palestinian neighbor to pop over for a Sabbath afternoon ice cream social. That sort of thing just isn’t done! In fact, the dominant mentality in that region is for people on both sides to say, “*I have hated you for so long I don’t even remember why I hate you. I just do. It’s tradition!*” The animosity between Samaritans and Jews had been going on for better than 400 years by the time Jesus met that woman. And here, two thousand years later, the tensions appear just about as nasty as ever.

I want you to appreciate how deeply-entrenched the problems of race and clan are in that region. But I also want you to notice Jesus' tactic here, because it is not only instructive, it's timeless. Faced with this woman's comment, he refused to be drawn into an argument over which race is superior. In fact, he ignored the issue of race altogether and said, in effect: "*We have more important things to deal with.*"

If you long, as I do, for peace in the Holy Land, let me suggest that you pray that God will move the hearts of people in leadership; that God would make people like Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian Chairman Abbas deeply aware of their common humanity, and the right of every person there to live in peace.

I suspect the only way we will ever overcome the hurdle of prejudice (racial or otherwise, in the Middle East or here or anywhere) is by following Jesus' example and setting aside those obvious differences. I'm not suggesting that we should deny our differences. But we cannot let them dominate our thinking. We need to be able to look into the eyes of that person whose skin or eyes or name or customs are foreign to us, and to see within that person someone who, just like us, loves and hates and fears and dreams, who longs for a decent life, and who wants to be treated as a person of worth. God help us to follow Jesus' lead, to not allow those barriers of prejudice, however deeply-entrenched they may be, to turn us away from a meeting of hearts.

And that's exactly what Jesus was after here. He wanted to get to that woman's heart. But first he had to set aside those differences on which prejudice feeds. So he changed the subject. He began to talk in metaphors about the gift of "living water" that can become an inner source of eternal life. But the woman obviously didn't understand what he was talking about. They just weren't connecting. So Jesus took the more direct approach. He said to her, "*Go, call your husband and come back.*" ~ "*I have no husband,*" she replied. ~ "*You're right,*" he said. "*The fact is, you've had five husbands, and the man you now have isn't your husband.*" Ouch!

2. Notice her counter-offensive. She confronted Jesus with a second obstacle: ***responding to religious preference.*** "*Sir,*" she said with reserve in her voice, "*I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; but you Jews claim that the place we must worship is in Jerusalem.*" Isn't that a nifty piece of verbal footwork? Jesus had just scored a direct hit on her private life. He had said to her, "*Listen, you've already run through five husbands, and now you're shacking up with number six.*" To which the woman replied, "*Well, I can see that you're a prophet... So why don't we talk about religion.*" Have you noticed that when a conversation becomes a little too personal, the focus usually shifts to one of the old standbys: religion or politics or the weather? In this case it's religion.

But Jesus was after this woman's heart. He didn't let the problem of racial prejudice stop him. He was certainly not about to let the issue of religious preference turn him aside. This woman had asked him which form of worship, Jewish or Samaritan, was more true to God. So he took that issue of true worship and laid it right back on her heart. He told her the time had come when people will have to realize that true worship, real substantial contact with God, isn't a matter of form or location or ritual, it's a matter of the heart. And when your heart reaches out to God in truth, God's Spirit completes the transaction. That, he said, is real worship; and it can happen on this mountain or in Jerusalem or anywhere.

In effect, Jesus was saying to her: *"If you're serious about getting in touch with God, then you have to be real with him. You don't have to be anything but who you are. You can come to God with all your questions and doubts, your guilt about past performance, your hopes, your dreams, your desires. Just be yourself with God and say, 'Here I am, Lord, just as I am. Deal with me as you will.' Come to worship like that, and you will experience an intimacy with God that you will never know as long as you go on thinking that the only way you can reach God is through some religious routine."* That is what it means to "worship God in spirit and in truth."

Do you understand what Jesus was offering this woman? Whether or not she understood it, I think that she deeply wanted to understand. And I say that because of her wistful reply. She said to Jesus, *"I know that Christ is coming. And when he comes, he will explain everything to us."* In other words, *"I really believe that when Christ comes, he will be able to put me in touch with God the way you've been describing it."* And Jesus said, *"Woman, you are talking with Christ right now."*

3. Just then, it says, the disciples returned, and the woman left. The conversation was over. But something happened in the last moments of that conversation. All it says is that the woman left her water jug, went back to town and called to her neighbors, saying: *"Please, come with me. I want you to meet a man who knows everything about me. Could this be Christ?"* Something remarkable happened to that woman. Her defenses had been systematically dismantled. And as Jesus set aside the racial prejudice, as he took her polite argument on religious preference and laid it back on her heart, they connected. By being real with her, he **reached the real person**. He broke that final barrier.

Now, I don't want to leave this lesson as though it were a kind of theoretical discussion on how to do effective evangelism. I want you to see how it applies to you. So let me ask you a question. Do you know anyone who needs to be that kind of real person with the Lord? What would it take to overcome that final barrier – for you to reach the real person? I'll tell you what it takes. It takes a real

friend. In our scripture today that friend was Jesus. But it could be anyone. It could even be **you**. But you would have to be willing to do two things.

First, pray. Ask God to show you one person who needs that kind of friend – someone who is willing to accept them just the way they are. It could be a neighbor; maybe a co-worker; it might be a fellow student. It may be someone sitting here right now; or it might be someone you’ve never met. The point is that you need to ask God to identify that person who needs that kind of true friend. And trust God. He’ll do it.

Second, put your prayer to work. Ask God to help you treat that person the way Jesus treated that Samaritan woman. Once you have locked your sights on that person who needs to be accepted as they are, take the first step to make it happen. It may surprise you to see how a simple act of kindness can overcome all kinds of barriers. Let me tell you about one such miracle. It happened at a family camp that a pastor named Barry Johnson was leading. Johnson tells the story this way:

I spotted him early in the evening, dressed in tattered gray. He had a stubbly beard and a warm smile. He appeared to be in his seventies. As the kids plunged headlong into the games, there he was, right in the middle. Of course his partner was called upon to wait occasionally and help him move from time to time. But no one seemed to mind.

In discussions this man would stalk the subject, waiting until just the right moment to drop a concise thought or two. Then, as his listeners digested his wisdom, he would flash a gap-toothed smile and glance around the circle. He looked like a misfit, but he was beautiful.

On the fourth night he slipped out of his group and joined me by the coffee dispenser. *“Barry, I want you to pray for me,”* he said. ~ *“What’s the problem?”* ~ *“I have to go to Chicago tomorrow for X-rays. Something to do with my lungs. I used to smoke a lot.”*

I had thought we were far enough from the circle that no one could hear. We were not. One of the kids heard it, and one of those simple, glorious moments of life was upon us. His group rose and formed a ring around us. Then, one by one, each of them, teenagers, parents and grandparents, uttered a prayer for this man. As they prayed I looked at him. His head was bowed and he was quiet. Wet spots dotted the front of his shirt. The next thing I knew, the whole crowd had clustered around him and they were singing, *“He’s got the whole world in his hands, He’s got George Palmer in his hands...”*

Some weeks later I learned that the X-rays proved negative. It was no surprise. If there was anything wrong with him, those people loved it right out of him that night.

I said at the outset that our job here is to help people discover just how much God loves them through the saving grace of Jesus Christ and then help them grow in their faith so that it finds expression in the way they live. And if we're not about that business then frankly we have no business being in business. I want to be about that business. We already are, in so many ways. You and I have within us the Spirit of Christ, the One who can help us overcome prejudice, avoid the religious clichés, and by just being real ourselves, allow others to be real, too. That's our job.

Let's pray: Lord, sharpen our awareness of those who need right now to be seen as real. And as we need it, please give us those who can see us for who we are, and love us still, in the name of Jesus Christ.

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