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BARRIERS AND WELLS

John 4:1-17

Jesus was looking for ways to break through to this woman, and guide her to a new life.

It's possible sometimes for a few honest and caring words to break through the barriers that people set up against each other. I've seen this happen. One of the most interesting took place with a young couple I met early in my work as a pastor. The woman had run off with another man one morning, leaving her husband and children behind, but then had changed her mind and returned. The couple came to see me. The husband was a farmer, and found it very difficult to talk about himself and how he felt. But he managed to open up that day in my office. "I'm always scared," he said, "because my wife is so pretty. I'm always worried that someone will take her. I'm scared to lose her because I love her so much." He had never said anything like this before. She had wanted to hear it but never had. When he said it that day, she melted. All her barriers came down and her love flowed out like water.

This story of Jesus talking with this woman is much the same. He was able to break through the barriers that were set up between them and she was able then to open up and begin to change her life. However, there were so many reasons for this conversation and conversion to never have taken place: There were so many barriers between them.

First of all, in that world, women and men just didn't talk to each other like this. Women were considered to be second class. They were lower than men and men would not talk to a woman in public. Whenever you have two people, with one is considered to be more important than the other, then there is a huge barrier set up between them.

There was also a good bit of racism set up between them. Jesus was Jewish and the woman was a Samaritan. Most people think of Samaritans as "good deed doers," because of Jesus' story of "The Good Samaritan." But the point of that story was that someone as hated as a Samaritan could still do good. There was real animosity between the two groups back then, though you and I would have a hard time telling them apart. This dates back to an event that took place more than 700 years before Jesus met this woman. The Samaritans were Israelites who had been captured by the Assyrian Empire, and spread across the world. When they finally returned they were considered to be half-breeds. It was racism, pure and simple. She felt it. Jesus ignored it and broke through it.

There were cultural differences between them. There were differences in practices of etiquette, and it was hard to talk to each other without making some offense. They had some religious differences, but we will talk about that later. All of these were issues that Jesus had to overcome in order to connect with this woman.

I also think there was a bit of something un-likeable about this woman. People who study the Bible have made a great deal of the fact that she came to get water at the hour of noon. Most women would come to the well in the morning to get the water needed for the day. It would be cooler then, and they could chat about what was happening in the village. Was this woman shunned? Was it because of her five husbands? Or was she just un-likeable? I think there is something of that in her. Her answers to Jesus' questions seem to be defensive and accusing. Perhaps her life led her to be a defensive person. If you've ever worked with someone who is always defensive, you know how unpleasant it can be.

And all of these questions—sexism, racism, cultural-ism, religious differences, personality differences—all these were problem that the early church was facing. This story of Jesus' life that we call the Gospel of John was originally written for the young Christian community and they were trying to figure out how to break through all these barriers. Fortunately for us, we have solved all these problems and no church struggles with this anymore. Right?

Jesus put a lot of effort into breaking through all this. Clearly, Jesus does not like barriers.

In this conversation Jesus says that he can give her living water that will keep her from every feeling thirsty again. What exactly was Jesus talking about? It seems certain that he wasn't talking about any kind of physical water, though she pretends to think that he is, at first. So what is this living water that Jesus says she can have?

Could it be wealth? That's what most Americans think of when we are offered a great gift. We love money in this country. More people worship money, and give their lives to its service than to any religious God. That would be unlikely for Jesus, though, to offer that as a solution.

Did he offer her forgiveness? Maybe she needed to be forgiven for her sins. After all, she seems to be a pretty loose woman, moving from man to man. She has had five husbands and is now living with a man that she isn't married to her. Did Jesus forgive her for this? Actually, he says nothing about forgiveness.

Sometimes we want penance. We want to be given something to DO to earn the forgiveness we need. Whether it's climbing up the cathedral steps on our knees or just picking up some flowers and bringing them home, we like the idea of being given a task that will bring forgiveness. But Jesus says nothing about this at all.

Is it reconciliation? Is this something the woman needed? Many people present her story as the story of one who was shunned by the others. This was why she was coming to the

well alone. Did Jesus want to make her relationships better? Was this the living water he offered her?

Or was it the opportunity to get even with all those other people in town that shunned her? Was she going to get a chance to tell them all off? We love this in America, too. We love TV shows in which some “evil doer” is brought in and confronted and “told off.” And though we sometimes find revenge exciting and refreshing, it goes sour pretty quickly. It certainly doesn’t feel like a refreshing spring that wells up in us.

I suppose we often think of Christ’s gift to us as being peace. If not peace in the world, at least peace in our souls. If this woman is isolated from her community, or if she is moving from one relationship to another, trying to find something, then maybe she is in need of peace.

More likely, Jesus is offering her a spiritual life that comes about through the Holy Spirit. When you read the whole book of John you find that the Holy Spirit is often connected with water. Now, I would define the Holy Spirit as that which is from God that communicates with us. That’s not a great definition, but a lot better minds than mine of have tried and failed to explain this. Jesus is offering the life of God to her, that would sit deeply in her and be like a well of peace, grace, hope, love, and all these other things we talked about. Except revenge, I guess.

What happens next is pretty interesting. Jesus tells her to get her husband and come back, and she says she doesn’t have one. Jesus says, “That’s true. You’ve had five husbands, and are now living with a man who isn’t your husband.” At first glance this sounds pretty bad to us. I imagine the woman was guilty and embarrassed. But if you look at it closely, you can’t find any place where Jesus condemns her for her unusual life. The fact is, we don’t know why this woman went through all these men? We don’t know whether she has been a cheater and a deserter, or whether she has been widowed or divorced by these others. We don’t know anything about her relationship with this sixth man. It could be a relative who was also alone, a brother-in-law, perhaps, who was also alone, and the two of them set up housekeeping together.

It may be, as most commentators on this passage say, that she was a “loose” and adulterous person who has therefore been shunned by the community (especially those women who wish they had a different man than the one they have). But we don’t know whether this is so or not.

Either way, Jesus doesn’t condemn her. He just states what her situation is, and I hear a tone of compassion in it. If she has been through this many broken relationships, whatever the reason, she has had a tough life. Jesus recognizes this and knows it (somehow). He touches her with his words. She begins to break open. The barriers that stood between them are falling to his words of compassion. For the first time in a long time someone is seeing her as she is. She is moved. She almost gives in. Then she shuts

it all down and erects a new barrier. A better one. A famous one. One you have either run into or set up yourself.

Religion.

The woman uses religion to push Jesus away and to hold onto her barriers. She doesn't want to open her life; she doesn't want to feel the pain or to see the changes that must come. So he sets up the big bad barrier of religion by asking Jesus a question. This was a point of contention between Jews and Samaritans. We might not be able to get the intensity of it. But she points out that Jews say you can only worship God in the temple in Jerusalem, and Samaritans say you can worship God on top of this mountain in Samaria.

But Jesus does not fall into this trap. Jesus does not discuss religion with her, and the reason for that is that *Jesus is not the least bit interested in religion!* She recognizes that Jesus is a spiritual person, but she doesn't know that he is not religious. Jesus was never interested in religions. Jesus was interested in the Spirit of God within us. Jesus pointed people to God, never to a religion.

It may sound strange to you to hear this in church, that Jesus was not religious, but it's true. Jesus was concerned about people's inward faith, not their outward expressions. Religion is really a way of expressing our faith, but it is not our faith. Often religious people get more concerned about the external expressions of their faith than about the spiritual realities they live with.

It's much like an Ipod. I suppose many of you have them, right? Only two of you? Soon it will be required by the constitution that everyone have a cell phone and an Ipod. If you don't know, an Ipod is a way of storing and playing back music that you purchase from the internet.

There are many different kinds of Ipods, and many different styles. And you can have a long conversation about the merits of different styles of Ipods. You can talk about the cover design or how much music it holds. You can argue about the best way to purchase the music. You can even fight, if you want to, over whose Ipod is better than whose.

But what makes an Ipod valuable is not the outsides, but the music that's on it. I would judge how good an Ipod is based only on what music has been downloaded into it. If I turn it on and get only Lawrence Welk and Celine Dion, then I would say it is a lousy Ipod (although you may disagree). However, even worse would be to listen to an Ipod with no music on it. An Ipod with no music is really just a paperweight. It has no value.

Some people's religion is like an un-loaded Ipod. The outsides are all there. They might even look great! But there is no passion, no hope, no joy, no compassion inside. We can argue about whether to worship on a mountain or in a temple while all around us there are people in need is obscene. Jesus just wasn't going to do it. He told the woman that

real worship is not based on where you are, but on the Spirit and on truth. To know God, to have the Spirit in our lives, and to let our worship flow out of that is what we need.

Religion is a good thing, but it often functions as a barrier. Throughout my life I have seen it do this. I have seen the barrier of Catholic vs. Protestant, conservative vs. progressive, and now, Muslim vs. Christian. How sad this is. Religion is a barrier that can keep the spirit from flowing. Let's not let it do that here. Let's have religion that flows out of our freedom in the Spirit of God within us.

The living water that Jesus offered was not religion, but faith in Christ. When this woman believed that Jesus was of God, she began to be opened up to the Spirit. She began to see that she had value after all. She need not be condemned, nor live in the mistakes of the past. She was free from all that.

Christ is freeing me as well. I have found that my faith in Christ has enabled me to see with Christ's eyes. I can even see myself as Jesus does—a person who has made some (many) mistakes, but who still remains a being of infinite value. Jesus loves me, this I know. That makes it possible for me to really live and to open up my life to others. The power that comes from faith in Christ makes it possible for me to overcome the many barriers we people set up against each other. It makes me able to love.