The Ultimate Barrier Breaker

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Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making
and baptizing more disciples than John” 2 although it was not Jesus himself
but his disciples who baptized 3 he left Judea and started back to
Galilee. 4 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.” (John 4:1-15)

1. Barriers in the world

A month ago, I heard a story of a Korean pastor serving a church in Connecticut. When he visited Target with his family, an elderly woman was sitting at Starbucks’ Coffee inside the store. As soon as she saw them, she rushed out of the store. She was concerned that Asians carry the coronavirus.

The recent association of coronavirus with China has resulted in discrimination reports of Asian descent in the United States. In New York, Asian people were attacked in the subway. Two hotels in Indiana turned away Asian customers. In the UK, a student from Singapore studying in London was attacked by four UK people. A fear for safety has turned some in our society to use racial discrimination as a way to feel safe in these unsafe times.

2. A Samaritan Woman at the Well

In John 4:4 and the following, the apostle John tells us that Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Galilee from Jerusalem. As you see in the map of Israel, the territory of Israel can be divided into three regions: Galilee, Samaria, and Judea.

Samaria was located between Galilee and Judea. If a Jew wanted to go to Galilee from Judea or vice versa, he had two options. First, he could go through the territory of Samaria. Secondly, he could take the longer route and go around Samaria all together. Despite the much longer journey, Jews during this time avoided traveling through Samaria. They would often cross the Jordan, travel miles around the borders of Samaria, and then cross the Jordan again to travel between Galilee and Judea. This trip was intentional to avoid stepping foot into Samaria.

Why would the people go around the borders of Samaria? It is because there was a great hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. After the northern kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Samaria, fell to the Assyrians in 720 B.C., many Jews were deported to Assyria and the Assyrians moved in to settle the land. The intermarriage between the Jews and the Assyrians resulted in a mixed race.

The Jews who lived in the southern kingdom regarded the mixed race as impure and hated them, calling them Samaritans. The hatred between the two groups pushed the Samaritans to set up a center for worship on Mount Gerizim.

Verse 5 says that Jesus and his disciples came to Sychar, a Samaritan city, where there was Jacob's well. Although Jesus knew of the long-standing prejudice between Jews and Samaritans, we see here that Jesus takes the route through Samaria to go to Galilee. Jesus crosses the religious, cultural, and racial barriers.

While the disciples went into the village to buy food, Jesus was sitting by the well, resting. A Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water. Jesus, worn by his journey and thirsty, asks the Samaritan woman for a drink. She says, "***How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?***" 10 Jesus answers 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***" (verses 9-10). In the Jewish tradition, Jewish men were not supposed to talk with women in public. We see here that Jesus talks to a woman who is a hated and mixed-race Samaritan woman.

At the time, women typically came to draw water twice a day; once in the morning and evening. In this case, the woman came to draw water at

noon. This is probably because the woman did not want to meet other people who knew of her reputation.

Jesus says to the woman that he can give her "living water." What does Jesus mean by "living water"? In John 7:37 & 38, Jesus says, "***Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, 38 and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" 39 Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive***." Jesus is saying that a person's deep spiritual longing to know God will be satisfied by the Spirit.

3. She Has Found the Messiah

The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman continues in chapter 4 of John's Gospel. Jesus and the woman talk about many things. Although we won't cover all the topics, I would like to call your attention to something that happens to the woman at the end of the conversation with Jesus. John 4:28 & 29 says, "***the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"***

After the woman talked with Jesus, she was excited and was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. When she learned of his identity, the woman went back to the town and became a witness, inviting the people to Christ. Before meeting Jesus, the woman wanted to avoid all people. Now, the barrier between the Samaritan woman and the other people in the town was broken down.

Verse 30 tells us that the people leave the city and go to Jesus. After they stay with Jesus for two days, they say 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***" (verse 42). The people have firsthand faith through a direct encounter with Jesus instead of secondhand faith through the Samaritan woman's testimony. The Samaritan people experience living water through Jesus.

4. Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.

Since 2001, the message of the United Methodist Church has been "Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors." I am proud of our denomination's commitment to this openness. Like many immigrants to the United States, I have also often experienced racial discrimination by other Americans in the U.S.

Yet, I count the open attitude of the UMC as a blessing. I have experienced and have seen this blessing in the form of appointment to wonderful congregations and the denomination's continued support for ethnic minorities since becoming a UMC pastor many years ago.

I am grateful that the United Methodist Church emphasizes this openness to diversity and inclusion. I praise the Lord that our United Methodist Church is able to be home to a diverse group of people with different backgrounds and to all who need Jesus. I am very proud that the UMC has seven central conferences overseas in Africa, Europe, and Philippines. Annually the UMC sends $100 million to support our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. The UMC in America has extended the love of Christ, breaking racial, cultural, and economic barriers by sharing the mission shares with our conferences overseas.

5. Conclusion

Jesus intentionally travels to Samaria to meet a lonely woman who would go to the well by herself because of the barriers between her and the rest of the world. Through his visit, Jesus broke down racial, religious, cultural, and gender barriers. Jesus tears down these barriers to allow living water of God to go to all people, including all of us today.

Jesus' visit to Samaria touched the heart of an unnamed Samaritan woman and many other people. When she talks with Jesus, the woman experiences God's "living water," a love deeper than anything she could have experienced from a physical well or from any relationship in her life.

6. Who Are Our Samaritans?

These days the term "social distancing" has become part of our everyday lives. The concept is to encourage us to protect ourselves against the virus. While we need to be careful for health reasons, the current social distancing calls us to look at those who have already been experiencing a deeper social distancing in their daily lives because of racial, cultural, economic, religious, gender, and other barriers.

Jesus crossed deep barriers so that not only the Samaritan woman but also many other Samaritans could experience living water through Him. Jesus challenges us this morning to ask us to identify who our "Samaritans" are and calls us to cross these barriers so that others may experience living water of Jesus through us. When there is no barrier among God's people, everyone will experience the kingdom of God on earth. Now listen to a video clip: "As the deer" and enjoy the beauty of God's world with other human beings.