

Boundaries, Buckets and Blessings

John 4:5-42

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The Jews and Samaritans had been estranged for a long time. It all started when those who had been in exile and those who had not been in exile, couldn't agree on where the temple should be. Initially, it was a mild estrangement, but around 200 BCE, it grew in intensity. It ended with the Samaritans claiming Mt. Gerizim as their place of worship--the place where God resided; and the Jews claiming Jerusalem as their place of worship--the place where God resided. By the time Jesus met this woman at the well, the estrangement was entrenched. Reconciliation was long past being hoped for--they didn't even associate or talk to each other. Was it a quiet hostility toward the other? A civil distance? A distant coldness? We don't know, but when Jesus asked an unnamed woman for a drink at Jacob's well in the region of Samaria, he broke a centuries' old silence.

Not only did he break a silence between feuding relations--for this was, in reality, a family dispute over religion--he also broke the societal taboo that men and women who are not related should not speak to each other. We are told in v. 27, that the disciples were astonished that he was speaking to a woman. The woman herself cites the divide between the Jews and Samaritans as the reason Jesus shouldn't be talking to her, but the disciples notice the gender issue.

Jesus over-steps several societal and religious boundaries in his encounter with this unnamed woman. History hasn't been kind to her. For years, scholars have presented her as a woman with a sexually questionable past, a sinful woman, a prostitute. They get hung up on the detail about her 5 husbands, and her current living arrangement,

ignoring the fact that instead of condemning her, or even forgiving her for her sin, Jesus goes on to engage her in a deep, theological conversation. This Samaritan woman, without a name, probably isolated from her community because she comes to the well in the heat of the day, becomes a theological conversation partner with Jesus. Sure, there is some initial confusion about what Jesus meant, but her questions lead her deeper into conversation and understanding, until she eventually becomes the first witness in John to tell others about Jesus. This woman spreads the word about Jesus and many Samaritans come to believe through her testimony. Jesus says in John 3:16, perhaps the most quoted verse in the Bible, that God so loved the world that whoever believed in God's Son might have eternal life. This encounter with the Samaritan woman is Jesus' first venture into the "world", and it ends with many believing in him. This story is the embodiment of that verse.

There are many reasons this woman could be in the situation she is in. If we remember the story of Tamar, who was subjected to the levirate law of marriage, which says that if a woman's husband dies and leaves her without children to carry on his name, his brothers must marry her in order that she might conceive and bear a son to carry on his name. Perhaps this woman is also the subject of levirate law, and her 5 husbands have been brothers, all of whom have died. Perhaps the current man is refusing to marry her; in that society she would be powerless to do anything about it. If this is the case, her story is not one of her questionable character, but of how she is caught in a tragic situation. Regardless of the reasons, she probably lives a life of isolation, either from her own choosing--her shame at being in the situation she is in, or because others know her and judge her for her situation. There isn't just a divide between Jews and Samaritans, but within the community there are also those who are in and those who are out.

Dan Cathy, the president and Chief Operating Officer of Chick-fil-A, and Shane Windmeyer also know division. Back in 2012/early 2013, Chick-fil-A was in the news for its funding of anti-gay and lesbian groups and its opposition to same-sex marriage. Shane Windmeyer is the founder and executive director of Campus Pride, the leading national organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered college students and their allies. Campus Pride had a national campaign against Chick-fil-A, protesting their questionable giving history and Dan's public opposition to marriage equality. Dan and Shane knew about each other's groups, and were pretty sure they knew who the other was and what they stood for. There was anger and animosity toward each other and their organizations. There was no love lost, and no trust for the other. Campus Pride protested in front of Chick-fil-A restaurants for close to a decade.

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-l-windmeyer/dan-cathy-chick-fil-a_b_2564379.html)

Then, on August 12, 2012, Shane's phone rang and it was Dan Cathy. The 2 men talked for over an hour, and that conversation led to more calls the next week and the week after. Shane writes in a Huffington Post article that Dan Cathy would text him as new questions came to mind. These phone calls and questions led to deeper conversations, until finally the 2 men began meeting in person. Never before had Dan had conversations with someone in the LGBT community, so at times the conversation was awkward, but always genuine and kind. Shane writes, "It is not often that people with deeply held and completely opposing viewpoints actually risk sitting down and listening to one another." He says that Dan always sought first to understand, not to be understood. He began to take seriously the stories Shane told him about gay students who had slurs shouted at them on campuses close to Chick-fil-A restaurants, and confessed he hadn't realized the impact of his company's actions.

These conversations of respectful, consistent and sustained conversation eventually built trust. Dan's words and actions were consistent, always demonstrating kindness and openness to Shane and his concerns. Dan would often ask how Shane's family was, including his husband of 18 years. Both men were committed to a better understanding of one another; they shared a mutual hope of finding common ground and building respect. They learned that they were "people with opposing views, not opposing people." Shane learned about Dan's deep faith, a faith rooted in following Christ and living the teachings of Jesus. His faith meant that he was committed to the traditional view of marriage. However, his faith also allowed him to show love and compassion toward Shane. Shane honoured Dan's beliefs, and felt that Dan heard and understood his. Shane writes, "Dan, in his heart, is driven by his desire to minister to others and had to choose to continue our relationship throughout this controversy. He had to both hold to his beliefs and welcome me into them. He had to face the issue of respecting my viewpoints and life even while not being able to reconcile them with his belief system. He defined this as 'the blessing of growth.' He expanded his world without abandoning it. I did as well."

The Samaritan woman's encounter with a Jesus who broke through boundaries was no less dramatic than this story. The encounter with Jesus changed everything for this woman. As she talked more with him, and he revealed his acceptance of her--knowing everything she had ever done, but not judging, or rejecting her, and treating her like an intellectual equal--she forgot herself and went into the village, spreading the good news of Jesus. In encountering Jesus, she had a thirst quenched she perhaps didn't know she had. It was a thirst that went beyond the physical, to touch on the part of her that was parched and dry, the part of her soul looking for deep connection and belonging. The message she received from Jesus filled her with such joy and hope that she either forgot to keep herself separate from the others in town, or forgot that they had isolated her. The

news was too good to keep quiet about. She abandoned everything, leaving behind the bucket used to collect her daily water, and ran to tell the others.

We all bring what we have--the buckets and stuff of our everyday lives--to our encounters with Jesus and with others. In coming together, there are many boundaries and barriers we need to cross--boundaries of assuming we know who the other is, what they think, based only on what we can see, and how we interpret that. Those boundaries are real, and they are hard to cross. We are so good at seeing only what we want to see. And we are good at projecting only what we want others to see. What boundaries does Jesus have to cross to get to us? What boundaries do we have to cross to get to Jesus? What are the boundaries that we need to cross to get to others?

If we risk crossing those boundaries, if we can let go of our buckets, and see ourselves and others as Jesus sees, then we place ourselves in a position of blessing. In the last few weeks, as I've followed stories of the divisions in our denomination over same-sex relationships, I've heard stories of blessing and experienced the blessing of engaging in conversations with those who sit in a different place than I do. And I've become more deeply convinced that as we do this, sitting at the same table, risking the crossing together, seeing the other for who they really are, that that is the only way we will get through this together.

A friend told me a story of her experience at one of the regional meetings for IN-MI Mennonite Conference the other week. They were sharing around their table about their views on homosexuality, and as people were sharing, she realized she was going to be alone in her views. She decided to speak anyway, and shared that the risk in doing so was that she would be seen as not taking the Bible seriously, or believing that anything goes. When she was finished speaking, one person at the table said they needed her voice

there to give a face to the other side. When we have a face, he said, we can't demonize the other person. Someone else from the table gave her a hug, and apologized on behalf anyone who had passed judgement on the sincerity of her faith. For my friend, this was a deeply healing and hopeful experience. This is what it means to be church, and to engage each other in honest and deep ways--not just on this topic, but on all topics that divide us.

Shane ends his article with similar words: "I will not change my views and Dan will likely not change his, but we can continue to listen, learn and appreciate 'the blessing of growth' that happens when we know each other better....in the end, it is not about eating. It is about sitting down at a table together and sharing our views as human beings, engaged in real, respectful, civil dialogue. Dan would probably call this act the biblical definition of hospitality. I would call it human decency. So long as we are all at the same table and talking, does it matter what we call it or what we eat?"

May we find ourselves at tables, or wells, with Jesus, drinking deeply of the life-giving water that Jesus gives, knowing and being known, seeing and being seen. When we encounter Jesus, our lives are never the same.

I invite us now into a time of **confession**. We recognize the ways in which our actions fall short of our desires and intentions for following Christ. Our souls and lives are divided and torn with the realities of our faith and the challenges of putting our faith into action. Let us bring all of who we are into the presence of our loving Saviour:

Lord, you know who we are. You know everything we have done. We thirst for things that will never satisfy us. We commit ourselves to things that will never last. We fail to see the good in others and honour the image of Christ in them.

And yet God, you continue to meet us at the wells of our lives, where we bring our buckets, offering the stuff of our everyday lives to you. Forgive us, O Lord, and help us to leave behind all that separates us from others and from you; give us this living water, so that we may never thirst again.

Hear these words of **assurance**:

Christ crosses the boundaries that separate us from him, the boundaries that separate us from each other, and the boundaries that separate us from ourselves, and sees us and loves us. As we offer our buckets to Jesus, he becomes the Bucket for us, a well quenching our thirst with abundant, life-giving water. He is indeed our life and our salvation. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Thanks be to God!

Please come forward and take a cup of water, receiving the boundary-crossing, thirst-quenching, forgiving love of God.