

The team that plans most of our synod youth ministry decided to write a devotional resource, the vision of which was one page of reflection and one page of questions for each piece of scripture. The problem is that most of us are used to writing 10 minute sermons and not brief, one page reflections. So now we are in the painful process of editing, leaving behind everything that is not absolutely essential. It's like the joke that a sculptor's job isn't difficult: all they have to do is chip away everything that doesn't look like the statue they're trying to create. But of course, that's easier said than done. John's gospel for today is an exercise in leaving behind many things that get in the way of what is essential, the heart of God's love.

I didn't add the extra verses, because the lectionary gave us a lot already, but this chapter begins with John telling us that Jesus "had to go through Samaria" to return to Galilee from Judea. Geographically, that's not true; for political and religious reasons, Jews would normally avoid Samaria even if it meant a long detour. So if Jesus *had to* go through Samaria, it was for the purpose of intentionally connecting with Samaritans. We've mostly become desensitized to the shock value of Samaritans in gospel stories—Good Samaritan is a familiar expression to us and doesn't sound like a contradiction in terms—but in Jesus' day, there was deep division, animosity, and a history of strife between the Samaritans and the Jews. It is no small thing for Jesus to cross the Jewish-Samaritan border to speak to the woman at the well.

As the woman points out, this encounter is not just strange because Jesus is Jewish and she's a Samaritan, but also because she's a woman. Social conventions would have dictated that Jesus speak with a woman's father or her husband but not with her directly, and especially not with her alone. Jesus crosses that boundary as well. And it's a good thing that Jesus does not define this woman by her relationship to her husband, because of course we find out that she doesn't have one. We could speculate about her past and how she ended up with five husbands, but it should suffice to say that this almost certainly points to tragedy and not a failure of commitment on her part; remember that women couldn't legally initiate divorce, so she was either repeatedly widowed or abandoned. It's more likely that the community shunned her because they thought she was cursed than because they thought she was immoral, but whichever it was, she wasn't at the well in the cool of the morning or evening with all the other women; Jesus meets her there alone, in the hottest part of the day. Jesus doesn't judge her past; he only commends her for telling him the truth about it. Jesus is not deterred by her ethnicity, gender, marital status, reputation, or the harsh conditions in which she's working. He sets all of that to the side in order to relate to her as a child of God.

The woman has her own barriers to break down in this encounter with the Divine. Knowing her background, we shouldn't be surprised that she doesn't seem to trust Jesus at first. She questions why he would approach her considering the social divisions between them; she puzzles over his offer of living water; she wonders how he could claim to be greater than the patriarch Jacob from whom her community inherited the well; she recognizes his prophetic powers when he knows her past; she even asks him to settle a theological argument between Jews and Samaritans—where are people permitted to worship? Jesus finally identifies himself to her as *I am*, which should sound familiar to her and to us from the story of the burning bush, when Moses asks who he should say sent him to free Israel, and the Lord says, “Tell them I Am sent you.”

When the disciples return and see Jesus engaged in deep conversation with the woman, they are shocked. The woman herself is so moved by the experience that she leaves behind her water jar—her whole purpose in coming to the well in the first place—so she can run and ask the town, *This man can't be the Messiah, can he?* in a way that suggests that the answer is no, of course not. But the townspeople believe her—even though she is the unluckiest woman in town—and they invite Jesus to stay, even though they also would have had to overcome the Jewish-Samaritan divide in order to welcome him. After interacting with Jesus themselves, they make it a point to tell the woman that it's no longer her testimony but their own experience that has led them to believe that Jesus is the Savior of the World, which makes them sound pretty ungrateful. Yet for all the assumptions that the townspeople held against the woman, all the manmade lines that Jesus had to cross to reach her, all the defenses that the woman had to let down to experience this divine encounter—in spite of all of that, this ends up being the longest conversation that Jesus has with anyone—of any religion, race, or gender—that is recorded in any of the Gospels, as well as this being the first time that Jesus identifies himself to anyone with one of his *I am* statements which become such beloved metaphors in John's gospel—*I am the good shepherd, I am the bread of life*, and so forth.

John portrays God's love as fiercely persistent, setting aside and working through every discernible barrier. The woman responds to that life-changing love by leaving behind her previous focus—literally the jar in which she would have carried life-sustaining water—so that she can share with others the good news of the God who knows everything about her, everything that isolated her, yet who reached out to connect with her. God stops at nothing to love us, crossing every barrier that others or we ourselves have built around us. What do we need to leave behind in order to love other people with the boundless love of God?