

Sanford and Samaria

John 4:5-42

July 21, 2013

What a heatwave! You know it's bad when you feel your feet actually sinking into the asphalt as you walk across the street -- when you pick up the garden hose to spray your parched plants and the water that comes shooting out is boiling hot. What a week. That said, my office is airconditioned -- thank you -- my son, on the other hand, spent the week outdoors with kids as a camp counselor; and my stepson the arborist spent the week climbing trees with a chain saw, so it hardly seemed appropriate for me to say things to them like "I walked to the mailbox today and oh my *god* I was totally drenched with sweat by the time I got back in the house." But really - *yuk*. It was kind of hard *not* to whine.

I did think, though, that surely the funniest whine of the week came from the park rangers in Death Valley, who issued a statement asking that the public please refrain from bringing any more eggs into Death Valley. Apparently hundreds of people have turning up to conduct their own experiments in whether you can, indeed, fry up an egg over easy on the sidewalks of Death Valley. Yes, you can, said the rangers. Now please, stop it. 'Cause we're really tired of scraping your eggs off the sidewalks. Or at least, added one ranger, bring a fry pan with you.

So let me tell you, as hot as it was here this week, it was that hot, that hot and more, on the day long ago when Jesus and his disciples wandered into the outskirts of the city of Sychar. It was high noon on a heatwave day, a fry-an-egg on the sidewalk kind of day, if there'd been sidewalks; a feet-sinking-into asphalt day, if they'd had paved roads. And they were tuckered out, Jesus and his friends. Pooped. Done in. Jesus found himself a little bit of shade to sit under, and then the disciples said what every kid on any trip says - "Jesus, what is there to eat?" And he said "guys, do I have to think of everything? go see what you can find." So off they went, the whole lot of them, looking for the nearest fast food falafel stand or whatever they could find. And they left Jesus sitting there.

Now, where he'd sat himself down seemed like a pretty good location to have picked, a good spot for a rest area, 'cause right near him, the story says, was a

well. Good deal. Or not. Fact was, a well was no good if you didn't happen to be carrying a bucket with you, a bucket with a looong rope attached, neither of which were in Jesus' backpack. So he was out of luck. Parched, hot, weary, with cool water right there next to him and no way to get at it. Until someone came wandering along, someone carrying a bucket on a long rope. And Jesus said to that someone, "hey, would you mind? could you let me have a drink of water from your bucket?" And they did.

So why is that story in the Bible? It was a hot day, Jesus was thirsty, someone gave him a drink. Whatever. That's gotta be something that happened pretty much every day of Jesus' ministry -- he was thirsty, someone gave him water. No big deal.

Wrong -- it's a huge deal. 'Cause of *where* he was and who that someone was.

Where he was, was Samaria. A little country between Galilee, where Jesus was from, and Judea, where Jerusalem was. And let me tell you -- the Jews of Judea and Galilee hated Samaritans so much that they would take the long way around Samaria to go back and forth to Jerusalem, kind of like avoiding Massachusetts on your way to Vermont, longer but do-able. And believe me, Samaritans hated them right back, all from a big theological dispute ages before. I'm guessing no one even remembered the *theology* of it any more, they just knew they were supposed to hate each other. It was so bad that Jews weren't even supposed to drink from the same well as Samaritans, let alone share the same cup. That's right, separate drinking fountains. It was so bad that if a Samaritan touched you, you were unclean until a priest made you clean again.

So there was Jesus, who had decided *not* to bypass Samaria on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem there he was looking a Samaritan right in the eye and saying, "hey, can I drink from your bucket?" Whaaaaaat??

And it gets worse. This Samaritan's a *woman*. Whaaaaaat? Are you kidding me? Men were not allowed to speak in public to a woman. Absolutely not. And -- I didn't want to make Olivia read all 42 verses of this story, but in fact Jesus not only asks the woman for water, but he goes on to chat with her at length. About the whole theology of Samaritans and Jews, and the whole deal with a Messiah being promised, and then Jesus even tells her, hey, I'll let you in on something,

I'm the Messiah. What? Talking with a woman AND talking theology AND sharing a major revelation?

So that's why the story says that when the disciples came back, they freaked out. Or, as it actually says: "Just then the disciples returned and they were astonished." There's the understatement to end all understatements. Astonished? How about stunned, horrified, flabbergasted.

And right about then, maybe, maybe they started to clue in to just who this Jesus was. Maybe they started to get that he really was a man with no boundaries, in the best sense of that phrase -- a man who simply didn't honor boundaries of tradition or race or nationality or gender. No boundaries. No lines. No divisions.

I told this story, this scripture story, two and half weeks ago to a whole bunch of teenagers and adults standing in a parking lot on a misty West Virginia morning. They, we, were getting ready to head out to our work sites on the second day of the Appalachia Service Project trip, and by work sites I mean homes; homes made of scrap lumber pieced together by someone's granddaddy, newspaper in the cracks for insulation; trailers with the floors rotted out perched on the side of the mountain in a tiny holler; homes with families who could no more imagine affording a new roof than flying to the moon; families for whom a trip to the next county over was as far as they had ever been.

I told this story because I wanted the kids and their leaders to take their cue from Jesus. I wanted them to know that if you're a follower of Jesus, then for you there **can't** be any boundaries. Which means instead of walking into someone's rotted trailer and thinking 'this is where those poor people live' instead thinking 'this is where my brothers and sisters live.' It means sitting on a front porch with a man who talks about what working in the minds did to his lungs and heart and feeling the hurt of that as deeply as if your own dad was talking. It means accepting with great delight the fried pie that the woman next door just plucked out of her deep fat lard fryer and gobbling it up. (Actually – that one I've never found particularly difficult. Those fried pies are good.....)

Not allowing any boundaries means, in the words of the Appalachia Service Project motto, accepting people right where they are, just the way they are. And I told the story about the Samaritan woman at the well just to remind our folks that that's pure Jesus. And our folks did it awfully well on this trip: they walked

in with open hearts and open arms, embraced the people they met, sat on those porches, listened to those stories, and erased the boundaries.

My own Samaritan woman moment on the trip came on Wednesday afternoon. One of our girls was feeling kind of crummy, so I drove her from Man, West Virginia up to the big county seat of Logan, thirty minutes away, with another girl along for company. And after she'd been seen at the medical center, and they got her all fixed up, we got in the car to head back to Man. Drove out of the parking lot, and then we saw this man; we all saw him. He was on crutches, and his left leg amputated at the knee, and he was crutching his way down the sidewalk from the medical center. And it was hot. It was a hot day. So I pulled over, and got out, and said to him "we'll take you wherever you need to go," and he said "no, I can't let you do that, I'm going all the way to Man." And we said "but so are we," and we made him get in. How were you going to get to Man? I said. I figured on hitching, he said. I don't know no one with a car that could come get me. And for a while he didn't say much 'cause his leg was really bothering him, but then he started talking. He talked about the mines, and about the accident that had taken his leg nine months before. He'd been a welder in the mines, and he'd loved it, he said. Before that, though, he'd been in the Army. Overseas? I said. Tikrit, he said. Oh, no, I said. You must have seen some terrible things. I *did* some terrible things, he said, and then there was silence in the car. You're no less a child of God, I said; you're no less a good man for what you had to do, and then he was crying, and I had to blink hard to see the road. And when we got to Man, I went to give him some money and he said he didn't ever want to be that person who needed others to give him something, and I said he'd be doing me a favor to let me, and we argued but I won in the end and he took a little money from me.

And when I got back in the car, the girls said 'wow', and we knew, all of us, we knew that we'd crossed over some boundaries into a place of pride and pain, a place of hardship and hurt, a place where a poor boy from the holler goes to Iraq cause that's the best way out and comes back to the mines because that's the only way home.

It seemed like we were by a well in Samaria for that length of time, sharing time together with someone we never thought to find ourselves with. What Jesus was trying to show his disciples on that hot hot day in Samaria, when they

caught him gulping water from a woman's bucket -- what he was trying to tell them was this is what I want you to do, all the time. I want you to ignore every barrier that the world puts between you and people, I want you to cross every boundary, shed every prejudice, every pre-conception.

It's been a week to think about that, hasn't it? I doubt very much that I'm the only person in this room who has thought about Trayvon Martin every day of this week. Every day since last Sunday, when every newspaper carried the headline 'not guilty.'

I hugged my son a little tighter that day, my son who was the same age as Trayvon on the day Trayvon died.

And this week, like you, I listened and watched and read and prayed. I listened to juror B37 explaining how she made her decision. I listened to Trayvon's grief-stricken mom as she wondered aloud whether people had been able to look at her son and see him as *their* son. I watched the protests and heard the voices of hurt and of anger, the clear and potent evidence all around us that we are still a nation scarred by the wound of racism.

And I thought about Jesus with the woman at the well and his complete inability to see difference his utter refusal to participate in the prejudices of his time.

On Friday President Obama shared his story. And he said that the way forward would begin not with another conference or panel on racism, but with each of us working on our own selves. With each of us, he said, doing everything we can to wring as much bias out of ourselves as we can.

It doesn't matter if you're Democrat or Republican. The truth is, if you're Christian, you've already been asked to do just that. You've already been asked to wring out every bias.

You've already been asked to do that by a Messiah who stood by a well in Samaria and asked for a cup of water from a woman. You've already been asked to do that by a Savior who never met a boundary he didn't cross or a prejudice he didn't ignore. You've already been asked to do that by a Christ who was incapable of excluding anyone and who asked us only to do the same.

Jesus started the journey toward peace on the day he decided not to take the long way around Samaria but to walk right through.

The journey continues today, with each of us, with every step we take, every boundary we cross. Amen.