Sunday, March 18, 1990
BREAKING THE BARRIERS
John 4:5-26

We human beings have a long, sad record of claiming superiority over others and therefore building barriers that separate us because of skin color, ethnic heritage, size of bank account, social status, or religion.

For example, people of one religion sometimes declare that they have a special relationship with God that is not available to others. You might remember a statement made by a Christian minister a few years ago. He announced that “God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew.” He must’ve forgotten about the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The claim of primacy because of one’s religion is an old temptation. In the Old Testament stories, the currents of religious exclusivism and universalism constantly oppose and interact. On one side, Jewish patriots urge the “special” status of Israel, her city of Jerusalem, and her temple in that city. Jerusalem is the City of God, and its Temple the special dwelling place of God. The Jews are children of Abraham and Sarah, especially chosen by God.

On the other side, there are Old Testament stories that declare that God is the Creator of all people and that all are equal in God’s realm. Furthermore, God’s worshippers are not confined to Israel. As an example, the perfect and upright man Job in the Old Testament is not a Jew.

In the story of Jonah, God wants to save the people in the city of Nineveh and sends Jonah to preach to them. Jonah doesn’t want to go. He is incensed that God would even consider loving and forgiving the people of Nineveh. They aren’t part of God’s chosen people. They don’t deserve to be forgiven. It’s a waste of time to go there. God gets Jonah there by having him swallowed by a sea monster and vomited up on the shores of Nineveh. Jonah reluctantly preaches. The people repent. God forgives them. Jonah is surprised and angry. That story is included in the Old Testament to remind all of us that God is the God of all people and that all human beings have equal value to God.

In the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, the clash of God’s universalism and our exclusivism is portrayed dramatically over and over again. Jesus is continually at odds with religious establishment people and their belief that they have a monopoly on God.

The good news of God’s love is for the whole world, not just for one group of people. “God so loved the world, that God gave the only Son.” The ministry of Jesus Christ proclaims that the doors of God’s community are open to everyone — the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, the outcasts, the unemployed, the homeless, the peacemakers, the war-makers, the prostitutes, and sinners of every sort.

Religious leaders, resenting Jesus’ inclusiveness, accused him of being a friend of sinners and tax collectors, and his reply was scathing: “Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you!”

God’s realm is not the special province of any religious or social or ethnic or racial group. In the New Testament stories, Jesus heals the son of a Gentile Roman Centurion, and in one of his most famous parables, gives the leading role to a good Samaritan. He also heals a Samaritan leper.

In the story we are considering today, from the Gospel of John, Jesus broke through every barrier the people of his time put up, and he is still breaking barriers.

Jesus and his disciples had stopped at a well at the sixth hour, noon-time. The disciples went into town to purchase food, and while Jesus waited, a Samaritan woman came alone to the well to get water. The usual practice was to get water in the early morning or in the evening when the sun had gone down. Then all of the women of the town who were able gathered at the well, and as they got their water, they heard and told the latest news.

This woman came alone at noon, probably because she had a bad reputation in her community and thus the other women stayed away from her, and she from them.

Today she met a stranger, and he opened the conversation by asking her to give him a drink. Surprised at the request, she asked, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” No one had treated her with courtesy and dignity for a long time.

As the conversation continued, Jesus became aware of an emptiness in her life. He told her that although she was able to give him water to satisfy his thirst, it was she who needed water of a different kind — living water — and that he could provide it for her.

She didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about, or if she did, she didn’t admit it. You’ve done that — a suggestion or an offer is made and you go on talking as if you hadn’t heard what was said.

However, Jesus continued with his metaphor and told her that the living water he was talking about was different and that if she had it, her whole life would be changed.

“Give me this kind of water,” she said, “so that I may no longer thirst or have to bother to come here to the well to get water each day.”

“Go get your husband and come back here,” Jesus said.

“I have no husband.”

“You are right in saying you have no husband, for you have had five husbands, and the man you are now living with is not your husband,” said Jesus.

She tried to change the subject. That’s a good move to make if you are embarrassed. Talk religion. Thus she said, “Sir, I perceive you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, and you say that in Jerusalem is the only place where people ought to worship.”

As I said last week, Jesus was a superb counselor. When he listened to people, he listened to more than the words — he listened to the feelings behind the words.

He heard her saying, “I’m tired of my kind of life; tired of having gone from one marriage to another; tired of adultery; tired of being a social outcast. I have a thirst for meaning in my life that remains unsatisfied.”

You know how it is. We human beings try all sorts of things in an attempt to satisfy our thirst for meaning. I've had people say to me, "If only I could change jobs, buy a different house, find the right marriage partner, then I would be happy."

Will Rogers said that now and then he grew tired of the same old surroundings. He thought a new place to live and work might help. So he would pick a city that sounded attractive. Before he moved, however, he would subscribe to the leading newspaper in his proposed new home city and read that newspaper for thirty days. He would always decide then not to move. The news from where he planned to live was no better than the news where he was.

Meaning in life rarely comes from a change in location or a change in jobs or a change in marriage partners or from buying a new house or having more money. Why is it that we tend to search for meaning and happiness in all the wrong places?

Years ago, I met a man I've never forgotten. He was very successful with a salary of over $300,000 per year. He had climbed the corporate ladder rapidly, but at the expense of his family. He told me about his recent divorce and the sense of failure that he felt when his second marriage collapsed. His son had a $100-a-day drug habit and was trying to overcome it in a treatment center. His daughter had left home at age 17, and no one in his family had heard from her again. I've always remembered his last remark to me. He said, "I have a big salary and good investments, but I'm living in spiritual poverty. Please pray for me."

The Samaritan woman was facing a crucial decision in her life. Jesus was certainly a prophet and more. She had never met anyone like him. But how does one go about changing? Where would she find forgiveness? How could she approach God?

So she said to Jesus, "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship. Where then do I go for help?"

It was an old argument between the Samaritans and the Jews. Where is God to be found and worshipped?

The woman was also asking deeper questions—"Is God the God of all people? Is God's love and forgiveness for everyone, including me? Can I find a new life in spite of my background? Is there some specified ritual I must go through to earn God's forgiveness?"

Jesus heard her questions. He told her, "You are seeking God and wanting to worship God and fill the emptiness in your life with God's spirit. God is also seeking you. God is not interested in whether you worship on this mountain or in Jerusalem. God cannot be localized in any one place or in any one form of worship or ritual. God is spirit, and they that worship God are to worship in spirit and in truth."

This Samaritan woman wanted the living water that Jesus had to offer. By accepting her as she was, Jesus was letting her know that God accepted her. That kind of acceptance is in itself the living water we all desire. She was now free to change her behavior and her life. And I'm convinced that she did. According to the story, she went back into the village and brought others to meet Jesus, and because of her testimony and the changes in her life, many Samaritans came to be followers of Jesus. They even invited Jesus to come into their town, and he and his disciples stayed there several days. This woman became the first apostle to the Samaritans.

With God's help, we can turn our lives around. And we can begin to break the barriers that we human beings continually put up.

There have always been geographical barriers that have separated human beings — mountains, oceans, rivers. They have for the most part been overcome by modern means of transportation. It's the invisible and false barriers that we erect which continue to separate us.

In his meeting with the Samaritan woman, Jesus broke four barriers.

He broke a national barrier. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, yet Jesus sent his disciples into a Samaritan town to buy supplies. Before the disciples began following Jesus, it would have been unthinkable that they would have even thought of doing business with Samaritans.
In Jesus' time, the Jewish-Samaritan quarrel was more than 400 years old, yet it smoldered as bitterly as ever. It was small wonder that this Samaritan woman was astonished that Jesus, a Jew, would not only speak to her but accept her as a human being.

Jesus broke a gender barrier. The strict Rabbis had a rule against greeting a woman in public. Jesus accepted the Samaritan woman in public. Jesus accepted the Samaritan woman as an equal, as a child of God.

He crossed a religious barrier. After the invasion of the Assyrians in 720 B.C., some of the people of the Northern Kingdom intermarried with the incoming foreigners and so lost their racial purity. They were so despised that people of their mixed race were not even allowed to help rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus broke a character barrier. Not only was she a woman — she was a woman of questionable moral character.

What an example Jesus is for us in breaking barriers. However, breaking barriers is dangerous. It's one of the reasons Jesus was crucified. There are always those who don't want us to do it. In our Daywatch Center in downtown Lincoln, there are those who do not like what this church is doing. We are treating homeless, unemployed people as human beings, as children of God. We have broken some traditional barriers which say that homeless and unemployed people are to be hidden from the rest of society so that they are not visible.

We are living out the message that God's love is inclusive of everyone.

Churches that follow Jesus are always breaking barriers. Think of the decisive role played by the East German Lutheran Church throughout the long years when hope was hard to come by. It was the church that had the courage to provide a meeting place for the peace movement despite government pressure and hostility. It was the church that publicly took up the cause of conscientious objectors over the protests of a state bent on forcing compliance to the draft, come what may. It was the church that gave shelter and encouragement to the groups protesting East Germany's callous rape of the environment. It was the church that addressed from the pulpit unjust emigration policies. It was the church that provided healing and counsel for countless ordinary citizens bruised beneath the wheel of relentless state socialism. It was the church that, even in the darkest times, held out hope, Christian hope, so that the barriers are coming down.

This story of the Samaritan woman at the well is one more example of the fact that God is inclusive. God hears the prayers of any human being. There is no one religion or one group of people that has a monopoly on God's love. Amen.