Sunday, March 10, 1996
CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES
John 4:5-42

We human beings have a long, sad record of one group claiming superiority over another and of drawing boundaries that separate us — whether due to skin color, ethnic heritage, the size of a bank account, perceived social status, religious beliefs, or some other difference.

For example, it is not unusual for people of one religious tradition to declare that they have a special relationship with God that is not available to others. Perhaps some of you remember a statement made by a Christian minister a few years ago. He announced, “God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew.” He must’ve forgotten about the Old Testament and the fact that Jesus was a Jew.

The claim of primacy because of one’s ethnic heritage, skin color, or religion — or a combination of these — is an old temptation that is still with us. In many of the Old Testament and New Testament stories in our Bible, the currents of religious exclusivism and universalism constantly oppose and interact.

There are incidents reported in the Bible where Jewish patriots on one side 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 is the special dwelling place of God. The people of Israel are children of Abraham.

On the other side, there are Old Testament stories that declare God is the creator of all people and that all are loved and equal in God’s realm. God’s worshipers 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 of Nineveh — who are not Jewish — and sends Jonah to preach to them. Jonah doesn’t want to go. It’s a boundary he is not willing to cross. He is incensed that God would even consider loving and forgiving the people of Nineveh. They are not part of God’s chosen people. They don’t deserve to be forgiven. It’s a waste of time to go there.

In the story, God gets Jonah to Nineveh against his will 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 none of us have exclusive rights to God’s love and care.

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 the religious leaders of his day and their belief that they have a monopoly on God.

The good news of God’s love is for the whole world. “God so loved the world that God gave the only Son.” The ministry of Jesus 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 rich, the Samaritans, and people of every sort.

Religious leaders, resenting Jesus' inclusiveness, accused him of being a friend of sinners and tax collectors. 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, social, or ethnic group. The boundaries we set up are not necessarily God's boundaries. 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 and heals a Samaritan leper.

During this season of Lent, we've been talking about some of the short journeys or little side trips that Jesus took as he carried out his ministry. In the journey we are considering today, he crossed some boundaries he wasn't supposed to cross.

On this short trip, a Samaritan woman met Jesus at a well, and in this meeting, Jesus crossed every boundary the people of his time had drawn.

This Samaritan woman is the first person he reveals himself to in the Gospel of John. She is the first outsider to guess who he is and tell others. She is the first evangelist, the gospel tells us, and her testimony brings many to faith.

Talk about crossing boundaries, which both of them did. The woman at the well was a triple outsider. In the first place, she was a Samaritan, which made her a total pagan as far as the purists were concerned. She was also, of course, a woman. In Jesus' time, women were not what you would call liberated. They were not even allowed to worship with men, whose morning devotions included the prayer, "Thank God I am not a woman."

Women had no place in public life. They were not to be seen or heard, especially by holy men, who did not speak to their own wives in public. One group of pious men was known as "the bruised and bleeding Pharisees" because they closed their eyes when they saw a woman coming down the street, even if it meant walking into a wall and breaking their noses.

She was a Samaritan and a woman, but that was not all. She was also a fallen woman. Respectable women made their trips to the well in the morning, when they could greet one another and talk about the news. But this was one of the people they talked about, and the fact that she showed up at noon was a sure sign she was not welcome at their morning social hour.

As Jesus deduced, she had been married almost as many times as Elizabeth Taylor and was living in sin at the time, which made it all the less painful for her to go to the well when everyone else had gone.

So imagine her surprise when she comes in the heat of the day with her water jar balanced on her head and sees a strange man sitting beside the well. And an even bigger surprise — he speaks to her and asks for a drink. That's a huge boundary to cross, to speak to a woman, and one who is not a Jew and is also considered an outcast, and to ask for a drink from her. The Jews had endless rules about what they could and could not eat and with whom they could or could not eat or drink. She knew he would be breaking every rule if she let him drink from her jar.

So they talk about it, and while it is never clear whether they are on the same wavelength, the woman begins to show interest in the water Jesus is offering her. "Sir, give me this water," she says, which is when he tells her to go bring her husband.

It is an abrupt change of subject, to which she might have objected. She could've said, "I thought we were talking about religion. Why are you inquiring into my personal life?" But she doesn't. She looks him straight in the eye and says, "I have no husband." With that partial truth from her, Jesus tells her the rest of the truth about herself. Jesus said, "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." With these words, Jesus is not condemning her but wants her to know she cannot hide from him.

At this point, she could have walked away from the conversation. She could have thought, "This stranger knows too much about me, and I don't want to hear more." We can hardly blame her. If he knows about all her husbands, there is no telling what else he knows about her, and she decides she would rather not find out. It's time to introduce some mental static so that the man with the X-ray eyes cannot read her so well.

In stories from the Bible like this one, it helps to use your imagination. Let's speculate for a bit on why she might have had five husbands.

Perhaps her first husband thought of her and treated her as a piece of property. That was not unusual at that time, and it still happens today. One day, as was in his power, he discarded her because he wanted someone else.

Her second husband may have been a man who loved her at first, but then someone else more appealing caught his eye.

It's possible that her third husband was 20 or more years older and married her because he wanted someone to take care of him. On her part, it provided security. Being older, he died and left her a widow.

Her fourth husband could have been one who physically and mentally abused her and then got tired of her and divorced her.

And maybe her fifth husband deserted her without divorcing her, which meant that she was still legally married and therefore could not marry the man she was living with.

We don't know her backstory, but it is clear she had a thirst for more than just physical water. She was tired — tired of the kind of life she'd been living, tired of having been in one marriage after another, tired of being a social outcast. She had a thirst for meaning in her life that remained unsatisfied.

You know how that 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'd be happy." It's not necessarily so.

For some reason, we tend to search for meaning and happiness in all the wrong places.

Some years ago, I met a man I've never forgotten. He was very successful in a material way with a salary of over $300,000 per year, and he was only 38. He had climbed the corporate ladder quickly, but at the expense of his family. He told me about his recent divorce and the sense of failure after his second marriage collapsed. His son had a $100-per-day drug habit he was trying to overcome in a treatment center. His daughter had left home at age 17, and no

one in his family had heard from her. I've always remembered his last comment to me. He said, "I have a big salary and good investments, but I'm living in spiritual poverty. Please pray for me."

He had other kinds of boundaries around him that he was afraid to cross. One was the boundary of material success. He thought if he stepped outside of that circle, he would be a failure.

What are some of the boundaries that hold you back, that keep you from being your true self? Maybe you are afraid to show your vulnerability. Maybe you are afraid to risk self-giving love. Or maybe your boundary is the fear of change. This week, consider some of the boundaries that you are afraid to cross — boundaries that hold you back.

Because Jesus was not afraid to cross old traditional boundaries in his encounter with the Samaritan woman, he gave her the courage to cross many of the boundaries that were holding her back.

By accepting her as she was, Jesus let her know that God accepted her. That kind of acceptance is, in itself, the living water we all need.

According to the story, she went back into the village and brought others to meet Jesus. Because of her testimony and the changes in her life, many Samaritans came to be followers of Jesus. They even invited him to come into their town — that was a big boundary to cross, for the Samaritans and for Jesus and his disciples — and he and his disciples stayed there for several days.

There are so many boundaries that need to be crossed in everyone's life. There have always been geographical boundaries or barriers that have separated human beings — mountains, oceans, rivers. They have, for the most part, been overcome by modern means of transportation, but there are still boundaries that we draw and tightly hold onto that continue to separate us.

Remember in this story, Jesus courageously crossed a national boundary when he went into Samaria. He crossed a religious boundary that was more than 400 years old. He crossed a gender boundary when he accepted the Samaritan woman in public.

What an example Jesus is for us in crossing boundaries, despite the fact that crossing boundaries is always controversial. It's one of the reasons Jesus was killed. There are always those who don't want us to do it.

Years ago, when lunch counters, public restrooms, and schools were desegregated, these were boundaries that many people did not want anyone to cross.

Some years back, when we started the Daywatch Center for the homeless in downtown Lincoln, there were those who did not want us to cross that boundary. We crossed some traditional boundaries that said homeless and poor people are to be hidden away from the rest of society. Churches that attempt to follow the way of Jesus are always crossing boundaries, and the same is true of individuals.

And the amazing fact is that when a church or an individual crosses boundaries, it is then that you meet God. That's what Jesus was saying in the parable of the sheep and the goats. Those

who crossed boundaries to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those who were sick and in prison — in so doing, they met Christ. “As you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me.”

The Samaritan woman met God that day in the person of Jesus, and when you meet God, then you know who you are. When you’re truly in God’s presence, you know who you really are — the good and the bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. Then too, like the Samaritan woman, you are able to go back and face people you thought you could never face again. Amen.