Book 31

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 because of skin color, ethnic heritage, size of 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 that "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 the special dwelling place of God. The people of Israel are children of Abraham and

Sarah, especially chosen by God.

On the other side there are Old Testament stories which declare that God is the creator of all people and that all are loved and equal in God's realm. 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 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, not only for one group of people. "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 out-casts, the unemployed, the homeless, the rich, the Samaritans, and people of every sort.

Religious leaders, resenting Jesus's inclusivness, 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 group. The bound-aries we set up are not necessarily God's bound-aries. In the New Testament stories, Jesus heals

the son of a Gentile Roman Centurian, 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 was carrying out his ministry and 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 pain-

ful for her to go to the well alone, after the others 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 understands that she wants what 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.

Now she tries to change the subject. You 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 in that time and it still happens today. One day, as was his in his power, he discarded her because he wanted someone else.

Maybe her second husband married her as a sex object, then left her for another woman who appealed to his appetite more.

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 4th husband could've been one who physically and mentally abused her and got tired of that 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.

What Jesus knew about her was that she was 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. 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 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 several days.

There are so many boundaries that need to be crossed in everyone's life. There have always been geographical boundaries or barriers which have separated human beings-- mountains, oceans, rivers. They have for the most part been overcome by modern means of transportation

and communication. It's the invisible and false boundaries that we draw and tightly hold onto which 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 in spite of 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 restroom-

s, water fountains, public service buses 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 which say that homeless and poor people are to be hidden away from the rest of society. Churches which 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 bad of it, the all of it, the hope in it. Then too, like the Samaritan woman you are able to go back to face people you thought you could never face again. Amen.