Sunday, March 7, 1999
INCLUDING THE EXCLUDED
John 4:5-15,27-30

A question that continually puzzles me, and possibly also you, is: why do we human beings fear other human beings who appear to be different from us? If I meet someone who in his or her outward appearance is dissimilar from me in almost every way — color of skin, unusual style of dress, unfamiliar language, or visible body piercings — my tendency is to not be as open and friendly to such a person as I would be to someone who appears to be more like me. Most of us tend to be more at ease and relaxed when we are with people we consider to be similar to us.

Why we have this fear, I'm not sure. I do know that it is one reason we often separate ourselves from people who appear to be different and unusual.

Not only do we separate ourselves, but we often go further and do our best to exclude those we consider to be dissimilar from us in outward appearance, political views, religious beliefs, ethnic heritage, and cultural practices. We do this by creating boundaries, and this has a long history among us human beings. Some of these boundaries are physical barriers to keep others out. More and more "gated" communities are being built in our time. Walls and gates are nothing new.

Historically, there is the "Great Wall" in China, and more recently there was the wall which separated East and West Germany. Many ancient cities had walls to keep out enemies. We have also had laws on the books to separate people that we consider to be different from us.

We know about segregated schools, drinking fountains that could only be used by one group or another, and separate seating in restaurants, movie theaters, and public transportation. There have been laws which prohibit people of one race from marrying people of a different race.

The claim of superiority of one group over another, even when there is no marked outward difference in appearance, has also built barriers between people resulting in exclusion. In the past, and in the present, people of one religion sometimes declare that they have a special relationship with God that is not available to others, and a boundary is created.

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 have forgotten about the Old and New Testaments.

In some of the Old Testament stories, the currents of religious exclusivism and universalism oppose and interact. On one side, there are Jewish patriots who urge the special status of the children of Israel, her city of Jerusalem, and the temple in that city. On the other side, there are Old Testament stories which declare that all people are equal in God's creation and that God's worshippers are not confined to Israel. For example, the perfect and upright man, Job, in the Old Testament poem, is not a Jew.

In the Old Testament story of Jonah, God wants to save the people in the city of Nineveh even though they are not Hebrews, and sends Jonah to preach to them. He doesn't want to go. He is incensed that God would even consider loving and forgiving the people of Nineveh. They are

not included in 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 God includes those we exclude.

In the ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, the clash of God's universalism and our exclusivism is portrayed over and over again. Jesus is continually at odds with the religious establishment of his time, its exclusivism, and its belief that it has a monopoly on God.

This exclusiveness expressed itself in different ways. One stream of the religious tradition in which Jesus grew up had a strong emphasis on purity and holiness. The reasoning went this way: God is holy, therefore to be accepted by God you need to be holy. To become holy and stay that way, you need to separate yourself from everything that is unclean.

Purity or holiness systems are found in many cultures. They become systems of classifications, boundaries, and barriers. There is a place for everything and everything in its place. People are put into rigid categories as well as places, things, times, and social groups.

Over and over again, in parables, healings, and in his actions toward others, Jesus challenged the holiness and purity systems of his time and the exclusiveness they produced. He said that true holiness or purity is not a matter of external boundaries and observances, but of the heart. He took it one step further. As an alternative, he proclaimed the good news of God's love for all people, especially those we want to exclude.

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."

The critique of the purity system is the theme of one of Jesus' most familiar parables, the story of the Good Samaritan.

In addition to reminding us to be a helpful neighbor, it had a much more pointed meaning in Jesus' time. It was a critique of a way of life organized around holiness and purity.

There are several purity issues in the story. The priest and Levite were obligated to maintain a certain level of purity; contact with death was a source of major impurity, and the wounded man is described as "half-dead," suggesting that one couldn't tell whether he was dead without coming close enough to incur impurity if he was. Thus, the priest and Levite passed him by because they were observing the purity laws.

The Samaritan (who by definition was radically impure according to the purity system) is described as the one who acted compassionately. Even though he would have been excluded from being in any kind of relationship with the injured man in the ditch, he included him anyway.

In the story we are considering today from the Gospel of John, Jesus challenged every purity rule and all kinds of other barriers the people of his time had erected. He included the excluded. The story is about meeting a Samaritan woman who is alone at a well while the

disciples had gone into town to buy food. When Jesus opened the conversation by asking her to give him a drink, she was surprised at the request. She asked, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

As they continued to talk, they got into a theological discussion. One of the questions the woman asked Jesus was where God could be found and worshipped. She said, “Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, and the Jews say that God is to be worshiped in Jerusalem. Which is right?”

She 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 new life in spite of my background and reputation? In their conversation, it had been revealed that the woman had been married five times, and the man she was now living with was not her husband.

Jesus assured her that God had already accepted her and that God is not interested in where she worshiped God. “God is Spirit and they that worship God are to worship in spirit and in truth.”

As a result of their conversation, the woman became a believer in God’s unconditional love and acceptance. According to the story, she went back into the village and brought others to meet Jesus. She became the first missionary to the Samaritans.

In his meeting with the Samaritan woman, Jesus included the excluded by crossing four boundaries.

He crossed a boundary created by suspicion and hate. The Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans, yet Jesus sent his disciples into a Samaritan village to buy supplies. Before the disciples began following Jesus, it would have been unthinkable that they would have even considered 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 no small wonder that this Samaritan woman was astonished that Jesus, a Jew, would not only speak to her but treat her as a human being.

Jesus crossed a gender boundary. The strict rabbis had a rule against greeting a woman in public. Both official and folk Judaism were deeply patriarchal, as were other cultures of the first-century Mediterranean world. Women were nobodies. They had few of the rights of men. They could not be witnesses in a court of law or initiate a divorce. They were not to be taught the Torah. They were separated from men in public, almost invisible as they still are in some parts of the Middle East. Meals outside the family were male-only affairs. A woman’s identity was in her father or husband.
In this setting, the role of women in the Jesus movement is striking, as is illustrated in this story. Jesus accepted the Samaritan woman in public and treated her as an equal, as a child of God.

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

Jesus crossed a character boundary. Not only was she a woman, but she was also considered to be a woman of questionable character.

What an example Jesus is for us in crossing boundaries and thereby including the excluded. Jesus was the leader of an inclusive movement, which did away with the boundaries of the purity system. It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some people of stature who found his vision attractive.

What are some of the boundaries that separate us today and keep us from including the excluded?

The church continues to have boundaries that exclude. Some Christian groups practice "closed" communion. You cannot come to the Lord's Table unless you are a part of that denomination or congregation. There are Christian groups that will not allow women to be ordained as clergy, and even some churches where women cannot teach or vote.

In parts of the church, there are groups that emphasize holiness and purity as the Christian way of life, and they draw their own sharp social boundaries between the righteous and sinners. It is a sad irony that these groups, many of which are seeking very earnestly to be faithful to Scripture, end up emphasizing those parts of Scripture that Jesus himself challenged and opposed.

In the church and in the culture, there is still the tendency to see the color of skin as a boundary that separates us, despite the fact that recent studies in anthropology tell us that the whole concept of "race" is something we human beings have constructed and has no basis in biology, and it certainly has no basis in theology, where all of us are created in the image of God.

Although gender boundaries are increasingly being crossed, many still remain. Fortunately, the old idea that there was "men's work" and "women's work" is now being dispelled. We see women plumbers, truck drivers, mechanics, ministers, doctors, lawyers, bankers, firefighters, and police officers.

Now let's be personal. 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. Maybe you are afraid to risk including the excluded.

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.

There are so many boundaries that need to be crossed in each one of our lives personally and in the culture as well. There are so many who are excluded who need to be included, and following the way of Jesus calls us to do just that.

The amazing fact is that when a church or an individual includes the excluded, it is then that you meet God. That's what Jesus was saying in the parable of the sheep and the goats. Those who included the excluded by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting those who were sick and in prison, in doing so, met Christ. "As you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me." Amen.