

## BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

This is a rich moving story that we can appreciate on any number of levels. One scholar has described this passage as breaking down barriers. Despite both being descendants of Jacob, Jews and Samaritans hated each other and did so for centuries before the time of Christ. If they were to speak to each other the conversation might not be pleasant.

And yet Jesus speaks. He speaks to a Samaritan and not in an insulting way. One barrier has just come down. He speaks to a woman, which men would not necessarily do and certainly a rabbi would not do. Down comes another. Furthermore, she's seems to be outcast. Women didn't come to wells by themselves. She's living in what could called an irregular situation. Jesus doesn't berate her for her sinfulness but he doesn't ignore it. He simply tells her what she already knows. So Jesus isn't only speaking to a woman but it seems a shunned woman. Another barrier falls.

Jesus asks her for a drink. For Jews to use utensils of Samaritans would make them unclean; not morally unclean but ritually unclean. Another barrier goes down. When the disciples return from buying food, which may have made them ritually unclean, they find Jesus talking to a woman.

Finally, thanks to the preaching of the Samaritan woman, the whole town comes out to see Jesus. He and his disciples stay with them for two days. Not only has a barrier that Jews had against Samaritans been broken; a barrier Samaritans had against Jews has also been broken. Ethnic and racial barriers fall before something greater, before someone greater, before Jesus the Christ who not only breaks down barriers but also builds up a unity among people in him.

Jesus' message ultimately, is to the whole world. It will reach beyond ethnic lines, it's for women as well as men and it goes beyond the Mosaic law of the time. It leads to him. While Jesus certainly breaks now barriers, he's no anarchist. Jesus will make demands of his followers such as, *deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me; whatsoever you did to the least of these you did to me; love your enemies*

and many more but all of these are at the service of a greater good, a greater unity and a greater love. In Christ, we find a unity that is to be stronger than human divisions. It's a call to be universal and the word, catholic, means universal.

Jesus breaks down barriers so that all people together, may worship in spirit and in truth. What does this mean? Throughout the Old Testament the prophets, sometimes with very strong language, condemned empty worship. People who would go through the exterior motions with no conversion of the heart, no conversion of their lives. They would even ignore the precepts of their own faith thinking that all they had to do was offer a sacrifice while ignoring justice and charity and even falling into grave sin.

Jesus would follow in this prophetic tradition, sometimes even quoting the prophets. To worship in spirit means that the external show of religion and the interior disposition of the heart are in harmony. Without that, the sin of hypocrisy begins to rear its ugly head.

To worship in spirit, means to worship with the heart, with the whole person. To worship in spirit means that God isn't confined to a mountain or temple. God is beyond our limitations. To worship in truth means first of all, that we acknowledge that there is such a thing as truth. That can be a novel or even controversial idea today. Jesus would say, *I am the truth*, and elsewhere, *the truth will set you free*. If something is true, it can make demands of us, it can call us to change our ways, to grow in conversion. To worship in spirit and in truth, is holistic worship as opposed to divisive, empty or even hypocritical worship.

Lent in particular, calls us to greater purity of heart, to do the right thing for the right reason, which is another way of saying that we're to worship, we're to live in spirit and in truth.

I tell students that grammar is important. It's important because people reveal themselves by their grammar. Let's take a look at the Samaritan woman's grammar. She starts off with, *You a Jew...* then three times she calls him, sir. Next, *I can see that you are a prophet*. Finally she goes off saying, *Could he possibly be the the Christ?* –Finally, at the end, we're told, *This is truly the savior of the world*.

In her story we can find our journey. Like the Samaritan woman, we thirst for something and it's not just water. We're called to worship in spirit and truth; to live lives of intentional faith where faith is the rudder on the ship of our lives. We too are called to share with others the gift we have received. Like Jesus, we're called to gently reach out to others, especially those on the edges and to treat them with dignity, to break down barriers.

In the second reading St. Paul tells us that the love of God has been poured into our hearts. A love that is renewed each time we celebrate the Eucharist. Encountering the love and mercy of God, this woman moved from being a seeker to being a believer and then from being a believer to being a proclaimer. Like the Samaritan woman, we too can ask questions and asking questions about our faith isn't a bad thing. It shows that we are engaging our faith, that we value it and that we want to grow in it.

By his mercy, may Jesus break down the barriers in our world that have their origin in the barriers around our hearts, so that we all may share in the light and the love of our God and worship him in spirit and in truth.