

“Wall-Breaker”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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John 4:5-42

In a world with so many walls, Jesus was a breaker, not a maker. That set people free way back when. It gave them a new outlook on life. When Jesus crossed someone’s path, the landscape of their existence, once cluttered with formidable obstacles, opened up to reveal fresh opportunities, a whole new way of being. And if we honor Jesus’ identity as a breaker, not a maker, of man-made walls, we and many others may be set free, too.

Take, for instance, talking to the Samaritan woman. That was a radical act. Samaritans and Jews avoided each other. The bad blood ran deep, centuries deep. They disagreed severely about scripture, worshipped on different mountains, flung nasty accusations against one another. It was so irritating that stay separate from each other was the only thing that made sense, but separation only fed their hatred, because once you’re isolated from someone, it’s easy to lose sight of your common humanity, and hating gets easier.

But Jesus apparently didn’t care about any of that. He was tired from the journey, and thirsty, so when he came to the well and saw the Samaritan woman, he asked for a drink. Now she was not ready for that wall to come down, and that’s often the case. Maybe, like so many others, she thought the wall made her safe, or maybe she admired the wall simply because it had always been part of the architecture of her life. Whatever the case, the wall was a prison, not protection, and Jesus was ready to break it down.

When the Samaritan woman refused to give Jesus a drink, on the basis of the mutual animosity between their peoples “Jesus answered her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given

you living water.” This confused her. “Sir, you have no bucket.” It also riled her up. “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?” But Jesus intrigued her when he explained that “those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty again.”

That was a deal-maker. No more hauling heavy water from the well to her home. So she accepted, but “Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’” Don’t have one, she answered. That’s right, Jesus replied. You’ve had five husbands, and the guy you’re currently shacking up with isn’t one of them.

Now to understand the sting of that statement, it is important to know that in ancient times, one of the things that Samaritans and Jews did agree on was that no woman, under any circumstances, was to be married more than three times, even if she was widowed by every prior husband. So now the scandal extends beyond the broken wall that once stood between Samaritan and Jew. Jesus is dealing with someone likely shunned in her own community. Another wall shattered in pieces on the ground by his acceptance of her for who she was.

It’s interesting that this intrepid woman didn’t recoil from the implied criticism. Instead, she was amazed that Jesus, a perfect stranger, knew this about her. Notice how Jesus breaking down the walls of clan and custom by consorting with a Samaritan woman who had been married a few times too many had broken down her natural fear of ridicule and made her open to the remarkable fact that Jesus had insight into who she was, which in turn gave her some insight into who he was. “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.”

Still, she had an objection. We don’t even worship on the same mountain. Now that might seem silly to us, but people back then took the location of their holy spaces very seriously. In fact, we might do well to consider that 2,000 years from now, people will look back on many

of our most serious disagreements and wonder what our problem was. But Jesus stopped her cold.

Mountains don't matter, "but the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth." In other words, the realtors have it wrong when it comes to worship, to how we connect with God. It's not about location, location, location. That's an exterior thing. Spirit and truth, however, are a matter of the mind and the heart. That is where God chooses to construct His temple, within people created in His own image. That is where God chooses to dwell. And with that claim from Jesus, another wall came falling down. One of the biggest barriers between Samaritans and Jews, the different mountains on which they chose to worship, is summarily declared irrelevant.

The woman essentially replies, "Well, I know things will be different when the Messiah arrives," and Jesus basically says, "Who do you think you're talking to?" Now that must have come as a shock, but the disciples, returning from their quest for food, had a nasty little surprise of their own. Here was Jesus, alone, talking with a Samaritan woman. What a scandal! "No one said, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you speaking with her?'" But I'd lay a large wager that they were asking both of those questions silently in their heads.

The Samaritan woman, astonished, rushed back to her city to tell everyone she knew. Considering her reputation, it hard to see how she could have been regarded as a reliable witness, but for some reason people believed her anyway and came out to meet Jesus. See how the barriers came crashing down between this woman and her community, between Samaritan and Jew. It's just amazing what the power of Jesus can do.

But in the meantime, there's a little interlude where the disciples try to get Jesus to eat, but he's not hungry. Now how is that possible? After a long journey, anybody's depleted and

needs something to eat, but not Jesus. No, he's got his private stash of snacks, or so the disciples initially think. Jesus explained to them that what feeds him "is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." What really feeds Jesus is his mission, and anyone who's worked straight through lunch without even noticing or become so motivated that dusk became dawn without a single yawn knows that even the natural walls of human need and endurance can be broken down by the inspiration of a worthy purpose.

This isn't to say that we should practice unhealthy habits. Jesus eventually ate something. At some point, he got the drink of water he asked for, too. But Jesus felt a sense of urgency that robbed him of his appetite, and he expressed it, as Jesus so often did, with a brief agricultural metaphor. "Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest?' But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting."

And yet another wall falls, this time the natural barrier between the planting of a seed and its germination and growth to full flower and fruit. What Jesus was telling the disciples is that the seeds of faith he had planted, and remember this is very early on in his ministry, were already ripe for harvest. The normal duration between sowing and reaping has evaporated: a sign of God's great abundance, a sign of the fertility of the soil, or rather a sign of souls desperate for a Messiah who could quench their thirst for justice and mercy and freedom and peace. You can see what Jesus said coming true when the Samaritans invited him to stay for a few days, after which they declared their belief in him. The seed of faith goes into the ground and pops up ready for picking in the blink of an eye. That's good news, but what difference does any of this make to us?

Well, Jesus remains a wall-breaker, not a wall-maker, even though plenty of religious people build high, thick walls using and abusing Jesus and what he said and did. We need to

avoid that. We need to embrace the wall-breaker who accepts us for who we are. We need to follow his example and break down the barriers that separate people, whether those walls are made with the seemingly impregnable stone of race and ethnicity, the brick of class, the flammable wood of political ideology, and whatever other substances comes easy to hand as building material to keep people separated from and filled with hatred for one another.

And how do we do that? Same way Jesus did, by being vulnerable enough to express our need, even if we anticipate refusal. By simply talking with someone that every culture norm tells us we should avoid and ignore. By being honest about who we are and seeking out the truth about who someone else is, and accepting that person as they are, even though every time-honored rule orders us to shun them. We become a wall-breaker like Jesus, instead of a wall-maker, every time we commit ourselves to the sacred purpose of bringing freedom, forgiveness, mercy, and peace to the people we meet.

It is thirsty work, but the living water stands ever ready for to drink. It will often come as a shock to some people, but wall-breaking is the best way to alter a landscape choked with obstacles that impede our view and imprison our souls. It's the best way to work through the barriers that keep us from where we want to go, from where God wants us to go. May the living water within us break down the walls! We'll use the rubble to build a road to the Kingdom of God. Amen.