

Today Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well.

You remember Jacob. He's the one who deceived his father, stole his brother's rightful heritage, and wrestled with an angel of God until he was badly injured, refusing to let go until he received a blessing. Jacob was a lot nicer after that beating and blessing.

Jacob wrestled with God and this Samaritan woman is **struggling** with the son of God - a Jewish man alone at Jacob's well.

The Samaritans and the Jews don't have much in common except Jacob, the patriarchs, and slightly different notions of the Messiah. They share a belief in the same God, but are divided on pretty much everything else. They're related just enough to really hate each other.

You know how it is. People who really irritate us, who we truly shun, are often the ones we're related to in some way. A bitter divorce is one example. Denominational splits. Jews and Samaritans. These fighting parties can't get away from each other completely, and that makes the cruelty to each other all the more common and vicious. These rifts cause suffering for generations.

Now here's Jesus, offering to heal the rift. He reaches out across Jacob's well in a way that violates all the rules of engagement. Jesus and the woman at the well belong to cultures who can't stand to be around each other. They're opposite genders, and there are probably a handful of other rules Jesus breaks just by telling this woman to give him some water.

The woman argues with him. She demands to know why he would speak to her, a woman AND a Samaritan. She demands to know how he proposes to get living water. She demands to receive this living water right now. She struggles and wrestles going back and forth with this strange Jewish man when the smartest, safest, most socially acceptable thing to do for both of their sakes is to get away from him. But not this Samaritan woman. She remains engaged with Jesus.

Jesus, for his part, remains engaged as well, offering to bridge the gap between them. He reaches out to connect with her, to heal the rift, and it takes a good bit of work. He has to get past the social stigma and the religious restrictions before she can accept the spiritual healing and reconciliation that only the Messiah can offer.

Jesus first offers her living water that will allow her to never be thirsty again. More than that, living water that will give eternal life. Her demand for this water is too worldly, too literal. But she remains engaged in the conversation. The social rift seems to be bridged.

Jesus leads her again to the spiritual by telling her to bring a husband he knows full well she doesn't have. This allows him to show her that he really does have something spiritual to offer. The religious gap appears to be crossed.

Now our Samaritan woman has one more beef with Jesus the Jewish prophet. **His** people insist that **her** people are worshipping in the wrong place. Rejection of her worship, her love of God, is the last hurdle she must jump before she can accept the healing, the reconciliation, the eternal living water that Jesus has to offer.

Jesus is as skillful here as he is in all of the gospels. He knows exactly when to avoid a direct answer and exactly when to give one. Jesus says, yes, the Jews have it right. Yes, the promise and reality of salvation comes from the Jews. No doubt about it. But now that salvation is here, it's time to resolve these differences. It's time to heal and reconcile what has been between us for generations.

"...the hour is coming, and is now here," he says. This is an opening, an offering, and our Samaritan woman can either follow where he is leading or she can walk away.

"...salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here..." The woman realizes where this line of reasoning is going. This man is Jewish. This man is a prophet. This time is now. And this man is speaking of salvation right now. He's speaking of a new way of worshipping that God wants. A way of worshipping God that includes Samaritans.

Our woman speaks the word “Messiah.” She completes the suggestion she thinks Jesus is making. She accepts what he is offering. So she reaches out, not to fight this time. She says she knows Messiah is coming and Messiah will say these things to the Samaritans.

Jesus says, in one of the most dramatic scenes in all of scripture, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Here we have these two people looking at each other. Sacred words have been spoken. Sacred words have been heard. The chasm between them gone. The man in front of the woman is no longer a strange Jewish prophet but the one her people have been waiting for. This man is now known to her. This changes everything.

And then the disciples show up and everything breaks apart. The disciples show up and remind us about the social stigma and religious barriers between Jews and Samaritans - especially Samaritan women. They insist on proper social and religious behavior and try to drag Jesus back to worldly matters when he just spent all this time breaking through them to bring healing and reconciliation. The disciples think they are being holy and good. Jesus shows them, and us, that healing and reconciliation through himself is truly holy and good.

So much of our lives in society, politics, and even the church are like this today. We are increasingly divided. We shun others who are different from us, and we have the ability to shut them out of our lives altogether. Today we can truly disengage. We can choose to hear only news that support our politics. We can listen only to Christian radio stations. If we're into sports, we can go to an exclusively sports pub. If we're queer and trans, we can go to a **fully** inclusive and supportive church, abandoning those that are not.

We are more separate now than we have been in ages and we are less and less able to talk to each other past our differences. Even in the church. Less and less able to remain engaged with each other. Even in the church. And yet if we do not remain engaged with each other, even wrestle with each other, Christ cannot heal us.

We are not finished with issues that can divide us in the church. As we face them, however, let's follow the path of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Let's identify and question our social stigmas. Who do we shun and cut off from simply because of outdated purity rules or because others will look down on us if we associate with “them?” Let's identify and question our “little t” traditions in church. Do these keep people out? How can we worship in spirit and truth while maintaining our identity? Does our worship create a barrier to entry? Do we insist that new people in church worship **exactly** like we do? What new ways of worship do we resist and why do we resist them?

Jesus and the Samaritan woman struggled with each other, but in the end Jesus bridged the gap between Jew and Samaritan. He can do the same for us. All of us.

Someday, in the not too distant future, church will look a little different. Someday, church might have folks in it that we would never have dreamed of calling brother or sister or sibling. But church has always been that way. Jew, Gentile, Samaritan, slave, free, rich, poor, men, women, conservatives, liberals, young, old, repentant sinners, unrepentant sinners, and yet more sinners.

In the end, Jesus bridges that which separates us. We wrestle and argue and resist, but so long as we remain engaged - with Jesus and with each other - we will receive healing and salvation.

Amen.