

Crossing Lines

There was a priest in a real poor area of New York City who lived not in the church rectory but in a tenement apartment, and part of his ministry was inviting the street walkers who plied their trade of prostitution to come in and clean up, to rest, to have a bite to eat.

It was an odd arrangement and there was plenty of folks who sniffed at the idea: with anything from figuring the priest was indulging in some free services to the pimps of the women who didn't want any other man having an influence on their lives.

And so the priest was often ostracized by the respectable folks and beaten up by the pimps.

Crossing lines is a hard thing to do.

I remember a couple of years ago a homeless fellow who also seemed to have some mental issues soiled himself badly, and then wandered onto our parking lot.

He smelled to high heaven, but there was Tom Ishida scrambling to get this fellow cleaned up, scrambling to find him some fresh clothes, and doing all of this as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

Crossing lines is what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

And that's where Jesus takes us this morning.

It's important to get what the scene is here in order to see what's actually going on.

When you first heard about this gal's 5 husband's you may have assumed that she's the Samaritan version of Elizabeth Taylor or Zsa Zsa Gabor — who — for the under 40 crowd here, are two women well known for their many marriages.

But, as I've mentioned a time or two before, context is everything when you try to hear what scripture is saying, and in the case of our Samaritan woman, there's not a chance that she was some heartbreaking man-eater who changed her husbands like she changed her underwear.

In those days, only men could divorce a woman.

Women had no right to divorce a man.

And a woman without a man, in those days, is in a poor pickle indeed, since there are so many limits on what a single woman can do, who she can associate with, how she can earn a living.

The fact is, this gal is probably someone who cannot have children — barren they call her — and the reason she's at the well in the middle of the day, all alone, instead of coming with a group of women in the cool of the early morning, as one would expect in such a traditional culture, well, that's something we can relate to pretty easily — no one wants to catch what she has.

You know the story.

Someone has a string of bad luck in life, whatever that bad luck may be, and folks who know about it tend to stay away, tend to get a little superstitious, not wanting her bad luck to rub off on them.

Having had 5 men who dumped her, a 6th who won't even go to the trouble of marrying her, you don't need to be Sigmund Freud to realize that this is one hurting lady.

And that poses a problem for Jesus.

Because in that culture, in those days, not only did Samaritans and Jews hate each other, not only did they each regard the other as the worst sort of heretics, but a Jewish man was simply not permitted to talk story with a Samaritan woman.

Which is why she is shocked when Jesus crosses the line and asks for a cup of water.

He asks for his need while at the same time knowing all about her need.

And while many folks think they hear Jesus talking about forgiving her sins when he's talking about the 5 husbands and the latest live-in, that's actually us putting a 21st century spin that gets it all wrong.

What Jesus knows about her is her lostness, her isolation, her shame — the shame that comes when we don't feel we've measured up, even through no fault of our own.

And into that shame, in her back and forth with Jesus, she begins to experience the unconditional love of God: "it's not on this mountain or that church where one comes into the presence of God — whenever you worship in spirit and in truth, there shall the living God find you!" he says to her, he says to us.

And then she seems to get that glimpse, that glimpse that tells her maybe this is the one — and Jesus responds to her insight using the exact same words that Moses hears from the burning bush when he asks God to name himself: as God from the bush says to Moses, so Jesus says to this woman: “I am.”

Sitting on a dusty well in the heat of the noonday sun, engaging a woman whose poor luck has left her alone and ashamed, the fullness of God smiles.

Saint Paul says it this way:

“Everything of God gets expressed in Jesus, so you can see and hear God clearly. You don’t need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too.” Col 2:9. (The Message Tr.)

And I think that’s what she’s feeling as she drops everything, including the water jug, and runs back to the town to share the good news that is even now embracing her: that no matter who I am, no matter what my life has been like, no matter the curses I secretly believe God has cursed me with, no matter the shames or secrets or lies I’ve told myself to make the unbearable seem somewhat bearable, in the face of all of my broken humanity, God is here, sitting right next to me, knowing me more intimately than I know myself, knowing everything I’ve ever thought, felt, fantasized, done or hoped to do, and in the midst of all of that knowing me through and through, this God LOVES ME!

Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church and the father of the reformation, always knew about this intimate knowledge God has of each of us, and for a long time, Luther HATED God for it.

It drove him crazy to think that no matter how hard he tried to be holy, he continually messed up, and fumed at the idea that there was no way to hide from this all encompassing God — until he is given one day the grace to see that God doesn’t love us for our good deeds, God doesn’t love us for walking the straight and narrow, God loves us because God loves us — a free gift of grace — a chance to exhale — a chance to say thank you — and a chance to give that schmuck over there who irritates me a break, because God gives me a break every single day.

Crossing lines allows Luther to move from a faith based on his own abilities to please God to a faith that rests in the certain conviction that God loves us not because we are good, but because God is good.

Crossing lines is what sends the Samaritan woman urging her townsfolk to “come and see,” (the same invitation Jesus gives to the very first disciples in the very first

pages of John's gospel) — crossing lines turns the life of that woman, a life that seems for all the world to be lost, she is turned into the very first apostle — who — like Mary Magdalene at the tomb that Sunday morning — is sent by Jesus to announce the good news she has seen and heard.

(I must say that I chuckle when our Roman brothers insist women can't be priests because no women were apostles: yet the very first apostles to be commissioned and sent by Jesus are indeed women: this Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene!

But that is a sermon for another day.....)

Crossing lines is what it means to follow Jesus.

Just last month, in the war ravaged Central African Republic, a country where Christians and Muslims for years lived together in peace, is now being torn apart by sectarian violence.

In response, "a Catholic church in one small town has taken in about 650 Muslims seeking sanctuary from Christian marauders. Father Xavier Fagba, the priest at the church, is determined to keep providing sanctuary ... because 'the Muslims discovered in our church, as we discovered about the Muslims, that the God we worship is the same God.'" *Christian Century*, 3/19/14, at 8.

In a similar way, the current president of Iran sent a check for \$400,000 to the only Jewish hospital in Tehran with the message that "our government intends to unite all ethnic groups and religions, so we decided to assist you." *Id.*

Just a glance at the front page of the paper tells us we are living in times where the urgency for we Christians to cross the lines that divide us is profound.

Everywhere we look, it seems, smaller and smaller groups are splitting into opposing camps, seeing those who were once neighbors now as new found enemies.

More than ever, as followers of Jesus, you and I must needs make a daily practice of crossing lines for the sake of people everywhere, for the sake of God's good creation.

There is one last story, closer to home, that I learned of only yesterday.

I don't know if you remember about 12 years ago about a horrific murder here in town — a sailor killed his wife while making one of his three children watch.

After the sailor's arrest, the children were split up between three foster families.

A story about them ran in the morning paper, and a Muslim from Morocco, now living in Hawaii, and his Vermont born wife, decided to take in all three children – and ultimately they adopted the boys.

At first, because of the trauma, the boys were all flunking school – Fs in every single class.

Today, after a decade of love and hard work and healing, the children are not only flourishing, but the eldest expects to be admitted to MIT next year.

When I said to the fellow who told me the story (he is the father who adopted these children) that, wow, you saved their lives ... he softly shook his head and smiled, saying, no, they saved our lives.

Crossing lines is what it means to be a child of God.

And, I suppose that's the way it must be, for after all, in Jesus, God crosses the most basic line that could ever exist, the line between the Creator and the created – the line between the divine and we who are formed of the earth.

In Jesus, the God in whom we live and move and have our being comes to live and move and be with us, making it, if not safe, then at least possible, for us to cross lines for the sake of each other.

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