

**SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS**  
**Commentary by Michael Sigler**  
**April 22, 2012**

**Friend of Outcasts and Sinners**

Read John 4:7-15, 23-26, 28-30

**Key verse:** “The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’” (John 4:9).

So much has been written, preached, and taught about this beautiful episode from the life of Jesus. As I read the story again this time, I was struck by how Jesus made it his mission to go where irreligious people were, to cross whatever barriers kept them from God’s best, and to offer them “living water.”

Consider some of the barriers that might have stood between Jesus and the woman at the well:

*Barrier #1: She was a Samaritan.* The prejudice and hatred between Jews and Samaritans had a long, ugly history. It went back at least 720 years when Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians took many of the Jews there into captivity. Among those Jews who remained, many of them inter-married with Assyrians and other foreigners.

Over time, these Samaritans lost their racial and religious identity. Their Jewish faith was, if not lost, at least corrupted. For example, Samaritans observed only the five books of Moses, not the Old Testament as a whole. Samaritans also came to believe that true worship should take place on Mount Gerizim rather than Jerusalem.

So, the barriers between Jews and Samaritans were very real. That’s why, when Jesus asked the woman for water, she replied: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (v. 9).

*Barrier #2: She was a woman.* William Barclay helps us understand the strength of this barrier: “The strict rabbis forbade a rabbi to greet a woman in public. A rabbi might not even speak to his own wife or daughter or sister in public. There were even Pharisees who were called ‘the bruised and bleeding Pharisees’ because they shut their eyes when they saw a woman on the street and so walked into walls and houses! For a rabbi to be seen speaking to a woman in public was the end of his reputation—and yet Jesus spoke to this woman” (from Barclay’s *The Daily Study Bible*).

*Barrier #3: She was living an immoral lifestyle.* The Jews held that a woman might be divorced twice or at the most three times. This Samaritan

woman had been married already to five different husbands and was, at the time she met Jesus, living with another man to whom she was not married (vv. 16-18).

The barriers were real and formidable. But Jesus refused to let any barrier keep him from loving people and offering them “living water.”

This woman’s greatest need was the same as everyone else’s greatest need. Jesus identified it when he said to 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” (v. 10).... Everyone who drinks of this water [the water in the well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (vv. 13-14).

For me, Barclay again helps capture in words both the spiritual thirst of people and the redemptive power of Jesus. 1. The spiritual thirst of people: “There is the thirst which only the waters of eternity can quench, and which only Jesus Christ can satisfy.” 2. The redemptive power of Jesus: “It is his power to see into the depths of the human heart. It is not that he sees only the evil of it; he sees also the sleeping hero in the soul of every person.”

Going where irreligious people go, crossing the barriers that keep them from God’s best, and offering them living water—Jesus did it again and again:

*Jesus crossed barriers to reach Peter, the rough and dirty fisherman.* Peter’s response was to say: “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). But Jesus loved Peter and saw the “sleeping hero” in him, the person Peter could become by God’s grace: “Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men’” (Luke 5:10).

*Jesus crossed barriers to reach the despised tax collector, Zacchaeus.* He was considered a cheat, a thief, and a traitor to his own people. The religious people saw Jesus crossing the barriers to Zacchaeus, and they “began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner’” (Luke 19:7). But their muttering didn’t stop Jesus.

Jesus saw the “sleeping hero” in Zacchaeus. And when Zacchaeus responded to Jesus’ offer of grace, Jesus said: “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:9-10).

*Jesus crossed barriers to reach the woman caught in an adulterous affair.* The people were ready to stone her. But Jesus saw the “sleeping hero” in her soul. So, he offered her grace and truth: “Neither do I condemn you. Go and leave your life of sin” (John 8:10-11).

So, as I read again this beautiful story of Jesus and the woman at the well, this realization speaks to me: Jesus made it his mission to go where

irreligious people were, to cross whatever barriers kept them from God's best, and to offer them "living water." And the question I am left with is this: Has not Jesus called me and you to do the same?

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