

3rd Sun of Lent (Jn 4: 5-42)

12 March 2023

Crossing Boundaries It might surprise you to learn that in spite of my excellent parenting skills, I must concede that my sons did not turn out to be perfect in every way. Now before you blame their mother, which I would never do, I must admit that they have matured into good young men. And while neither of them was ever really a big problem, on one occasion during their high school years, I felt compelled to sit them down and reinforce some guidelines for peaceful co-existence. During this talk, I drew the proverbial line in the sand and I promised to give them latitude so long as they didn't cross that line and I promised consequences whenever they did. Wouldn't you know it? One son honored the line from that point forward. But the other, well, let's just say that he loved to keep one foot dangling dangerously close. I'm convinced that there was no taboo that he didn't enjoy challenging.

While it is challenging for parents and persons in authority to see the persons in their charge challenge established rules and authority, the fact is that sometimes questioning and testing known taboos can be beneficial. Today's gospel offers a glimpse of one such instance. The entire episode of the Samaritan woman and Jesus at the well should have never happened. When traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jewish people were expected to bypass the most direct route through Samaria and take the 2 days longer path via the Jordan River trail. For that matter, Jewish men were forbidden to speak in public with women who were not their wives. Additionally, Samaritans were viewed as inferior and spiritually unclean, consequently, to share drinking water from the same bucket, let alone the same cup would have been viewed as absolutely and literally sinful. Be assured, that the Samaritan woman was completely aware of these taboos which led her to ask Jesus: "How is it that you, a Jew, asks me for water?"

The story could have ended there. But because these two people chose to ignore the man made taboos of their day, their world's were positively impacted. The woman at the well is transformed. She comes to know Jesus and to understand the everlasting spiritual water that he offers as the promised Christ. And she becomes an evangelist; running off to tell her village to: "Come and see a man who told me all that I ever did!" John's gospel tells us "Many Samaritans from that town believed in Jesus because of the woman's testimony." Furthermore, during the course of her conversion with Jesus, the disciples returned and witnessed Jesus engaged in forbidden dialogue and teaching with the Samaritan woman. Surely this experience would shape their willingness to offer salvation to non-jewish followers in the future. It's unfortunate that the disciples didn't arrive early enough to hear Jesus say that worshiping God wasn't restricted to the right mountain or the right city or reserved only for the Jews. Had they heard those words, perhaps several other taboos of the day would have fallen by the wayside much sooner.

Please note: there is an important distinction that must be made. The woman, the village of Sychar and the disciples were not changed simply because Jesus and the Samaritan woman violated the rules of their day. They were changed because of the respectful dialogue that Jesus and the woman shared in spite of the taboos that should have separated them. The social taboos prohibiting their conversation wrongly assumed that no positive result could come from interacting respectfully with one another. How many of our historical race, gender, economic, societal and political taboos suffer from a similarly false assumption? How many barriers and taboos have been erected between different classifications of people simply because common ground was deemed unachievable or even undesirable? Perhaps some of us are still dealing with similar bias. If we are, I would venture to say that we need to drink more of the life-giving water that Jesus - the Christ offered the Samaritan woman and continues to share with each of us.

In today's reading from St. Paul we heard that: "the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." All of our world's taboos are man made and all of them can be conquered with the love of God and the Holy Spirit in our hearts. I'm not sure what all of my son's line crossing accomplished, but it sure did give us several opportunities for conversation. Hopefully that shared dialogue was fruitful. But if it wasn't, the reason was most likely that at least one of us needed to drink more from the well that is the love of God.