

"Stay within the lines" a matronly classroom teacher tells a young boy as he colors a picture in a television commercial some years ago. The boy, however, wildly colors outside the borders of the picture. The commercial speeds ahead to the boy, now a young man, driving a very sporty car, while presumably, his fellow classmates of long ago have remained "in line" driving conventional cars. Once again he has burst the bonds of convention.

Lines, boundaries, borders, limits, have a useful purpose. They can, and do, provide order, direction, and safety in life. However, they can also be limiting, confining, preventing exploration, encountering new persons, places, experiences. Both Jesus and the Samaritan woman venture outside the lines, cross boundaries.

As a religiously observant Jewish man Jesus was not to have anything to do with Samaritans, half-Jews who had inter-married with Gentiles and, thus, were not considered "pure" ethnically and religiously. While Jews looked to the Temple in Jerusalem as the center of their religious observance, Samaritans looked to the rival temple that had been built on Mt. Gerizimas the focal point for their religious observance. In addition, it was forbidden for a Jewish man to converse publicly with any woman regardless of where they originated from. Yet the humanness of Jesus shows in this encounter. He is tired and thirsty from his journey, and after sending the disciples to procure food, sits down by a public cistern.

The Samaritan woman is also aware of the boundaries in which she lives. Whatever the circumstances surrounding her five marriages, she is a social outcast. While the other women in the town would have come to draw water at dawn, she comes at noon. Like Jesus she is forbidden to speak to a man in public, let alone a Jew. No doubt she is surprised when, arriving at the well, she encounters a man who asks her, "Give me a drink."

In speaking to each other, Jesus and the woman have stepped outside the lines of political and religious observance. For Jesus the act is even more dangerous. Not having a vessel to drink from, he would need to use the woman's bucket, thus adding to his ritual contamination, rendering a sinner, unfit to engage in Temple worship in Jerusalem.

Their discussion about water becomes a metaphor for the breaking down the boundary between them, and through them, the wall separating God and us. Jesus' thirst is not just physical. He is thirsting for the woman's faith. Jesus proclaims himself to be the "living water" that can satisfy her deepest longings. The woman is thirsty for recognition as a person, for forgiveness and wholeness given her past and present situation. In Jesus she finds "the spring of living water welling up to eternal life." Having tasted this "living water", placing faith in Jesus, she becomes an apostle, going into town and telling people about this man who dares to cross boundaries, break down walls, and offer the gift of God's divine life through faith in him. No longer is it necessary to go either to Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim. In relationship to Jesus the old borders have disappeared.

On this Third Sunday in Lent Jesus comes to meet each of us as we come to the well of our life, hoping to draw from it water that will satisfy our deepest thirsts. Perhaps like the woman we come burdened down with the truth that we have, or continue, to draw water from a well that does not quench our deepest thirsts, a cistern whose water long ago went stale. Jesus comes again today, breaks down the wall, crosses the border, steps across the line of sin that separates us from God and offers us himself as the "the spring of living water welling up to eternal life" in the image of the water flowing from the rock in today's first reading.

Jesus' outreach to the Samaritan woman and us is also given us as a missionary charge. Just as the Samaritan woman went off to proclaim what Jesus had done for her, so we, too, are called to cross lines, work at tearing down walls, erasing the borders of the many things that separate us from each other at home, school, our parish, the wider church, in Ames, the state, national and international community with the water of forgiveness, mercy, and justice.

Pope Francis stated a year ago: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not in the Gospel." (Feb. 18, 2016) Will we color within, or dare to color outside the lines?

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