

Crossing Boundaries

John 4:4-52

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Prayer: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable, even pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our strength and redeemer. Amen

Whenever someone asks me, “So, how did you and Des meet?” I usually give a slightly cheeky answer: “Oh, you know... I was just out island-hopping.”

Now, if you know anything about the Philippines, that actually sounds believable—we have more than 7,000 islands (That’s for high tide. You’ll need to add another 1,000 when the tide is low). And since Des and I grew up on two different islands, it makes for a good story.

But the truth is much less exotic. We met at the office where I was working in Manila just before I left for seminary. Des was already in seminary and had taken a short-term job during a break.

But whether it's at a city office or by an ancient well, there’s something powerful about a good “how we met” story. Often, it’s in ordinary encounters that our lives quietly change direction.

This morning, we hear another “how we met” story—Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well. What begins as a simple conversation ends up changing her life. It also changes how she sees her community. In fact, her experience reminds us that where we meet people matters just as much now as it did thousands of years ago.

Today, when singles look for a life partner, they might head to a party, a singles bar, or a dating app. But in the Bible, you went to the village well.

In the Old Testament, the well was the ultimate "meet-cute" venue. It’s where Isaac met Rebekah (Gen. 24), where Jacob met Rachel (Gen. 29), and where Moses met Zipporah (Exo. 3).

Literary scholar Robert Alter called these “meet-cute” encounters *betrothal-type scenes*.¹ A *type-scene* is a literary convention, a storytelling pattern used in the Bible, in which different characters experience similar life events in different stories. These moments follow a familiar pattern familiar to the audience.

But you can just think of it as a **movie trope** for us today.

Think about a classic Western: two gunslingers face off in the middle of a street at noon. You don't need anyone to tell you what happens next—you already know. Or think about thrillers: the villain is closing in, the hero jumps into a perfectly good car, and suddenly... the engine won't start.

We know these patterns by heart. And for a first-century audience, a man meeting a woman at a well was a clear signal. *"Oh, I know where this is going—wedding!"*

But when Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well, he flips the script. In all those Old Testament stories, the woman is the one who draws the water and gives the man a drink. It's her way of showing she's a "good catch." But in John 4, **the roles are reversed**.

Instead, Jesus offers to serve the woman. He tells her, *"If you knew who was talking to you, you'd be asking me for a drink—and I'd give you water that actually brings life."*

And here is the biggest twist of all: In a typical “betrothal type scene,” the man and woman get married. But Jesus isn't looking for a bride. He isn't there to marry one woman; he's there to “marry” back an entire rejected nation. He uses this familiar setup to perform a different kind of *marriage*: a union between two groups of people who absolutely hated each other.

For centuries, Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. To the “purist” Jews, Samaritans were a mixed race, spiritually contaminated by the Assyrian occupation and the worship of foreign gods. The tension wasn't just theological; it was bloody. In 128 BCE, the Jewish high priest John Hyrcanus had razed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim to the ground.

¹Robert C. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47-62.

It is not surprising, then, that these groups remained bitter enemies at least until the first century CE.

By Jesus's day, this was a cold war. The two groups were divided by a single, burning question: *Where is the right place to worship?* Is it here on Mount Gerizim, as the Samaritans claimed, or the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem? To us, the location might seem trivial, but as we know, the smallest differences often create the tallest walls of division.

When Jesus meets the Samaritan, the air is thick with suspicion. You have to understand the tension: Jesus is exhausted, covered in dust, and clearly Jewish. The woman is careful. She's seen men like him before, and none of them have anything kind to say to someone like her.

But after their conversation, everything changes. She runs back to the village. We can imagine she finds her group of girlfriends first. She tells them her encounter at the well. She's breathless, her eyes wide.

"You guys, I met a man at the well! I just met a guy!"

Her friends immediately lean in. "Wait, really? Tell us everything! Is he cute? Is he from around here? Did you invite him for dinner? Is husband number six finally on the horizon?"

The woman shakes her head, waving them off. "No, no, no! This is nothing like the others. This man... he's a prophet."

One of the girls groans. "A prophet? You mean like a preacher? Girl, please. Pastors are boring! Did he just stand there and lecture you about theology and the law? Spare us the details."

"That's the thing," she says. "He did talk about the scriptures, but it wasn't boring at all. I've never heard anything like it. He spoke with this incredible authority, but his eyes... they were full of compassion. He told me he's the Messiah. The one we've been waiting for our whole lives."

Then, she drops the real bombshell. "And... he's a **Jew**."

The silence is instant. "What? A Jew? Are you crazy? We don't talk to them. They're our mortal enemies! They hate us, and we hate them."

“I know,” she whispers. “I was just as suspicious as you are. I was ready for a fight. But the way he looked at me, and the way he spoke... the walls just came down.”

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman subverts the usual expectation of the “boy meets girl” narrative. It was supposed to end in a marriage proposal. That was the script.

But Jesus takes that script and tears it up. In a typical story, the woman provides the water. But here? The roles are reversed. Jesus is the one offering the drink. And it’s no ordinary well water—it’s *Living Water*—God’s purifying water, which can cleanse her heart of old hatreds and hostilities.

The encounter doesn’t end in marriage, as was expected.

But make no mistake: a *marriage* happens here. It’s just not a marriage between one man and one woman. It’s a “marriage” between two groups of people who had spent centuries trying to destroy each other.

After her conversation with Jesus, the Samaritan woman hurried back to her town to tell everyone what she’d experienced. She invited them to “come and see” for themselves. They headed out of the city to meet Jesus. Many of the Samaritans believed in him and talked him into staying. And he stayed there for two days (4:30, 39-42).

In this one conversation, Jesus isn’t just breaking rules; he’s demolishing walls.

- **He breaks the racial barrier** by sharing a cup with a Samaritan.
- **He breaks the religious barrier** by redefining what it means to be “pure.”
- **He breaks the gender barrier** by teaching a woman publicly—a move so radical it left his own disciples standing there speechless.

Jesus wasn’t just being polite. He was bringing a whole new way of being human. He was showing us a life where the “insiders” and the “outsiders” finally sit at the same table.

He overcomes our obsession with *exclusiveness* and replaces it with a kingdom of *inclusiveness*. Jesus looks at the Samaritan woman and tells her that the old arguments don’t matter anymore. He tells her that the

location of worship—this mountain or that temple—is no longer the point. True worship is found in "spirit and truth." He proves that when we worship in spirit and truth, the things that used to divide us—our race, our past, our gender— become the very things that make the "marriage" of God's people so beautiful.

But it's easy for us to look back at the Jews and Samaritans and wonder why they couldn't just get along. But if we're honest, that same "us vs. them" mentality is alive and well today.

We are still a people divided. We draw lines in the sand based on the color of our skin, the traditions of our faith, and our gender identities. We build walls of judgment to keep "those people" out, whoever "those people" happen to be for us.

But as a church, we don't get to stay behind those walls. Jesus is calling us to cross boundaries. He is asking us to look at the person we've been taught to fear—or the person we've been told to ignore—and see them for who they truly are: a human being, fully alive, and created in the very image of God.

He's calling us to stop being governed by our prejudices and start being led by our compassion. He's calling us to break the social conventions that dehumanize us.

So, let's go out there and **flip the script**, just like Jesus did.

Thanks be to God. Amen.