

In the late 60's I participated in a 6-week college student tour of 7 European countries. Germany was one of them, and one of the cities we visited there was Berlin. This meant going through the checkpoint at the border of East Germany, another one as we approached the city of Berlin from the west, and another one--*Check Point Charlie*--before we took a tour of East Berlin. While we were there I snapped a few pictures of the Wall, with the rubble that was next to it, and the broken glass and stones on top of it to prevent anyone from getting a good grip on it. This Wall had been a painful reality for the German people for many years. And yet in 1989 what the world didn't expect became one of the most joyful celebrations in history – the fall of the Berlin Wall. The news media captured all of this for us so that *we* could rejoice in the freedom of the German people, as well. And in more recent years, in a TV program about a British couple purchasing a home in Berlin, the cameraman did a sweeping shot of the remains of a section of the Wall--covered with beautiful drawings. What a change in perspective! Over time this wall, made by human hands, and once meant to divide humans, no longer was. Its old identity as a barrier was gone. It's new identity: a pedestal for works of art.

From there we move to today's Gospel lesson. To set the scene for today's story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we remember that within Palestine, in Jesus' day, there were 3 divisions of territory. In the north was Galilee, in the south was Judea, and in between lay Samaria. The quickest way from Judea to Galilee was through Samaria. However, there was a centuries-old feud between the Jews and Samaritans, because the Jews saw the Samaritans as people who had not maintained their Jewish racial and religious purity. This dated back to 722 B.C. when the Assyrian king had conquered and deported many of the people of Samaria, and brought in other conquered populations to be settled there. The Samaritans then intermarried with them and took on some of their religious practices. Therefore many Jews, when they needed to travel between Judea and Galilee, took a much longer alternative route, in order to avoid going through Samaria.

Jesus and his disciples, however, decide to travel through Samaria. And in doing that, *Jesus broke through the first barrier--traveling in an area in which most Jews would never consider traveling.* The disciples and Jesus are soon about to reach the town of Sychar, when they come to a well, known as Jacob's well, which was surrounded by land that Jacob purchased centuries earlier, after his reconciliation with his brother Esau.

It is now about noon, and as Jesus' disciples go on into the town to buy food, Jesus, tired out by his journey, decides to sit down by the well and rest. Then it so happens that a Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water. In those days in that culture, there were certain social norms that were followed. One of them was that in this situation, for a reputable rabbi to have a conversation with a woman—well, it just wouldn't happen. In fact the rule was that *“a man does not speak with a woman publicly on the street, not even his own wife, and certainly not with another woman, on account of gossip.”* But what does Jesus do? He breaks the silence and speaks to her. *Jesus has now broken through a second barrier--initiating a public conversation with a woman.*

*“Give me a drink of water,”* Jesus says to her. And she replies: *“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”* In her question she is actually asking: *“Why are you talking to me? I am a woman, and I'm not Jewish.”* But Jesus does talk to her, *breaking through a third barrier--involving himself in the life of someone of another race, especially a race despised by the Jewish people.* But he does it

for a reason--because he is a man on a mission--a mission given to him by his Heavenly Father--to bring people into a *close* relationship with God.

In fact, Jesus has walked, talked, and moved through these three barriers to open up the opportunity for ministry. First, to be able to offer the Samaritan woman the gift of eternal life; second, to have her reflect on the kind of life that she was living; and third, to help her understand what true worship is.

Similar to Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in last week's Scripture, Jesus is again using earthly things to point to spiritual things. And although Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink of water from the well, he immediately moves to a deeper conversation which has to do with "living water." And why does Jesus use this image of "living water"? It was because in the Middle East, the presence or absence of water determined where people lived, and whether they lived or died, physically. By the same token, if the Samaritan woman would receive the "*living water*" that Jesus could give her for her soul, she would once and for all receive the spiritual gift of eternal life with God.

Jesus then shifts the conversation to the topic of this woman's relationships, seeming to know everything about her life in that regard. Here Jesus *breaks through a fourth barrier--associating with a woman whose lifestyle and reputation would have caused other Jews to keep their distance from her*, but Jesus continues to reach out to her. And finally, as *the woman* changes the conversation this time, she brings up the differences between the religious traditions of the Samaritans and the Jews. Jesus now breaks through a *fifth barrier--being willing to discuss these religious differences with her--and to ultimately say that worship is not about the location or the building. It's not about the externals. It's about what is going on in our hearts, because the kind of worshippers God is looking for are those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship...who worship him...out of their spirits, out of their very being.*

The Gospel lesson ends with the Samaritan woman, who is aiming to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, becoming a witness for Jesus to the people of her community. And many of them now *break through their own barriers* in return, by coming to see and be with Jesus, whom they now claim as the Savior of the world.

Words from the Apostle Paul in New Testament tell us that Jesus is the one who has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles, and that through him we also have received the ministry of reconciliation. This means that we, too, are called to break through the things that separate us, and to strengthen the things that connect us to each other and to God. How is God calling us--you and me--to be a part of these kinds of ministries today? Amen.