

“Wall-Breaker”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
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John 4:5-42

In a world with so many walls, Jesus was a breaker, not a maker. That set people free way back when. It gave them a new outlook on life. When Jesus crossed someone’s path, the landscape of their lives, once cluttered with formidable obstacles, opened up to reveal fresh opportunities, a whole new way of being. And if we honor Jesus’ identity as a breaker, not a maker, of man-made walls, we and many others may be set free, too.

Take, for instance, talking to the Samaritan woman. That was a radical act. Talking alone with a woman other than your wife or a blood-relative was scandalous in Jesus’ time. What’s more, Samaritans and Jews hated each other. The bad blood between them ran centuries deep. They disagreed severely about scripture. They worshipped on different mountains and flung nasty accusations against one another. The hostility was so great that staying separate from each other was the only thing that made sense, but separation only fed their hatred, because once you’re isolated from someone, it’s easy to lose sight of your common humanity, and hating gets easier.

But Jesus apparently didn’t care about any of that. He was tired from the journey, and thirsty, so when he came to the well and saw the Samaritan woman, he asked for a drink. Now she was not ready for that wall to come down, and that’s often the case. Maybe, like so many others, she thought the wall made her safe, or maybe since it had been there her entire life, she held a fondness for it. Whatever the case, the wall was a prison, not protection, and Jesus was ready to break it down.

When the Samaritan woman refused to give Jesus a drink, on the basis of the mutual animosity between their peoples, “Jesus answered 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.” That confused her. “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep.” It also riled her up. “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?” But Jesus intrigued her when he explained that “those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty again.”

That really got her attention. That was a deal-maker. No more hauling heavy water every day from the well to her home. So she accepted, but “Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come back.’ Don’t have one, she answered. That’s right, Jesus replied. You’ve had five husbands, and the guy you’re currently shacking up with isn’t one of them.

Now to understand the sting of that statement, it’s important to know that in ancient times, one of the few things Samaritans and Jews agreed on was that no woman, under any circumstances, was to be married more than three times, even if she was widowed by every prior husband. So now the scandal extends beyond the broken wall that once stood between Samaritan and Jew. Jesus is dealing with someone likely shunned in her own community. Another wall shattered in pieces on the ground by his acceptance of her for who she was.

Considering the sensitivity of the subject, it’s fascinating that the woman didn’t react defensively or deny what Jesus said. Instead, she was amazed that Jesus, a perfect stranger, knew this about her. By simply spending time and speaking with the Samaritan woman, Jesus broke down the walls of clan and custom, which broke down her natural fear of ridicule and made her open to the remarkable fact that Jesus had insight into who she was, which gave her some insight into who he was. “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.”

Still, she had an objection. We don't even worship on the same mountain. Now that might seem silly to us, but people back then took the location of their holy spaces very seriously. In fact, we might do well to consider that 2,000 years from now, people will look back on our most serious disagreements and wonder, "What was wrong with them?!" But Jesus stopped her cold.

Mountains don't matter, "but the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth." In other words, when it comes to worship, to where and how we connect with God, the common refrain of realtors all over the world doesn't fit. It's not about location, location, location. That's an exterior thing. Spirit and truth, however, are a matter of the mind and the heart.

God chooses to construct His temple within people created in His own image. We and others are where God chooses to dwell. And with that claim from Jesus, another wall came falling down. One of the biggest barriers between Samaritans and Jews, the different mountains on which they chose to worship, was declared by Jesus irrelevant.

The Samaritan woman, astonished by Jesus, rushed back to her city to tell everyone she knew. Considering her reputation, it's hard to see how anyone would have seen her as a reliable witness, but for some reason people believed her anyway and came out to meet Jesus. See how the barriers came crashing down between this woman and her community; a community that likely had no respect for her, possibly even ostracized her? It's amazing what the power of Jesus can do.

But in the meantime, there's a little interlude where the disciples try to get Jesus to eat, but he's not hungry. Now how is that possible? After a long journey, you need to eat, but Jesus explained that what fed him "is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."

What really fed Jesus was his mission, and anyone who's worked straight through lunch without noticing knows that the natural walls of human need and endurance can be broken down by the inspiration of a worthy purpose. To be clear, I'm not endorsing unhealthy eating habits, but Jesus felt a sense of urgency that robbed him of his appetite, and he expressed it, as Jesus so often did, with a brief agricultural metaphor. "Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest?' But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting."

And yet another wall falls, this time the natural barrier between the planting of a seed and its germination and growth to full flower and fruit. What Jesus was telling the disciples is that the seeds of faith he had planted, and remember this is very early on in his ministry, were already ripe for harvest. The normal duration between sowing and reaping has collapsed.

The Samaritans invited Jesus to stay with them for a few days. Just a few days, and they believed in him, from seed to flowering faith, in just a few days! What a sign of God's great abundance, a sign of souls desperate for a Messiah who could quench their thirst for justice and mercy and freedom and peace. That's wonderful news, but how does it impact our lives today?

Jesus remains a wall-breaker, not a wall-maker, even though plenty of religious people use and abuse what Jesus said and did to build high, thick walls. We need to avoid that. We need to embrace the wall-breaker who accepts us and others for who we are. We need to follow his example and break down the barriers that separate people, whether walls made with the hard stone of race and ethnicity, the brick of economic class, the flammable wood of political ideology, or whatever other substance comes to hand as building material to keep people separated and filled with suspicion and hatred and malice for one another.

Jesus calls us to be wall-breakers, not wall-makers, and one of the most pernicious walls that needs demolishing is the barrier between the Church and a great number of people who do

not know Jesus Christ. Mutual suspicion, judgment, and blame prevail. For many of the unchurched, we are a bunch of hypocritical, inhospitable, out-of-touch people practicing an obsolete faith utterly irrelevant to life in a challenging and sometimes dangerous world. That hurts. For some Christians, those who rarely if ever darken the doorway of a Church are viewed with disdain instead of compassion. This time of year, we joke about those C&E Christians, who only show up to cram the Church at Christmas and Easter, taking our pews from us. That's a symptom of a serious underlying disease.

But what's that wall of separation really made of? Mainly, misperception born of ignorance, and we bear the brunt of the responsibility for it. Do we even know how to articulate our faith to another person in a way they can understand? What have we done to learn the core story of our faith and how to share it others? Who are those others, where do we find them, and do we really want to? Are we paralyzed by the fear that we'll get it wrong, that we'll be mocked and rejected, or that we'll get it right, with all the unpredictable consequences and changes that will bring?

We also need to look closely at our motives. Why do we want people to worship God with us? Is it about filling up the Church, so that we can feel popular and successful, or is it about filling up human souls with the living water of Jesus, so people can be free and enjoy hope and know an incomparable love? Just asking these questions, deliberately and persistently, starts chipping away at the wall, but the real demolition gets going when we follow the example of Jesus.

Just as Jesus did with the Samaritan woman, we can take the risk to talk with someone who's different, talk with the stranger, the one who is strange to us, someone that every cultural norm tells us we should ignore and avoid. By listening to the stranger, by seeking who they

really are, and accepting them as they are, instead of assuming who they are, we become wall-breakers like Jesus, instead of wall-makers. Every time we commit ourselves to the sacred purpose of bringing freedom, forgiveness, mercy, and peace to the people we meet, the walls come tumbling down.

Wall-breaking is the best way to alter a landscape choked with obstacles that impede our view and imprison us and others. It's the best way to work through the barriers that keep us from where we want to go, from where God wants us to go. And we are privileged to serve as the vessels through which the living water of Jesus flows, bringing life to parched places, but also the sheer power of water to erode, to wear away the walls of our world, grinding them down until they fall. I won't lie to you. It's going to be messy, but we can use the rubble to build a road to the Kingdom of God. Amen.