

“Disgusting”
John 4:7-15, 25-26; Numbers 12:1-10a

I don't even know if the photograph still exists. It was one of millions made in America in the late 1950's of youth baseball, football, and basketball teams. This one is of a little league baseball team — the Red Sox. I am in it. But I am the bat boy. Back before t-ball or YMCA baseball, in Ashland, Kentucky in 1957, there was only Little League baseball. And at seven years of age, I was too young to play, so they had found me a makeshift uniform like the older players.

I was in this position because the man standing to the left in the picture, the coach, was Ellis Childers, my next door neighbor. Mr. Childers worked at the oil refinery, like my dad. This fact, combined with his obvious baseball knowledge was all I really knew about him. It was only later I would learn, and understand, the significance of the events of his life. He had been a hot shot baseball player. The Chicago White Sox invited him to a training camp, where he met Whizzer White, later Supreme Court Justice Whizzer White. But months later in 1940, he was drafted and when he returned after the war, his time had passed. He married beautiful Maude, and played on a semi-pro team travelling both locally and nationally. But all of this was before my time, and would likely not have made an impression on me.

Which is also true of this long forgotten photograph. Except that when remembering it today, it becomes a powerful symbol of who Mr. Childers was, and the unknown impact he had on the lives of everyone in the picture. For there in the photograph among a sea of white faces, is one lone black one, Wilson Barrows. As a seven year old boy, all I remember is that Wilson could hit the ball farther and throw it faster than anyone else. It was only many years later that I realized Mr. Childers had brought the first African American player into the Ashland Little League.

Mr. Childers is dead now. Maude, his wife, still lives beside my mother. In all the decades I knew Mr. Childers, I never heard him mention, much less talk about breaking the racial barrier. Growing up in Kentucky, I know his action must have elicited fierce resistance and objection. And for my children and your children, and many of you, thankfully, the idea of integrating a sports team sounds like ancient history. Yet, the memory of that photograph reminds me of Mr. Childers's and Wilson Barrow's sense of fairness and equality, reminds me of their courage.

Now, in our scripture, we discover another instance of breaking down barriers that sounds tame to us today, but was a radical action at the time. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus has decided to take the shorter route from Galilee, travelling through Samaria. Because of the animosity between Samaritans and Jews, many Jews chose to bypass Samaria by going around it through Jordan. But Jesus decides to travel through what many Jews viewed as enemy territory. He stops at Jacob's well to rest, while sending his disciples into town to buy food. It is about noon, and as he sits in the heat of the day, a Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well.

Each person who came to the community well would carry their own water container. So, when this Samaritan woman approaches, Jesus says to her, "Give me a drink." This startles the Samaritan woman because one, Jews and Samaritans avoided interaction as much as possible, and no Jew would want to drink from a vessel used by a Samaritan. And two, no Jewish man would initiate conversation with a woman he did not know. It was considered unseemly.

So, the woman immediately says to Jesus, "You, a Jew, want a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?"

Jesus replies, "If you knew the gift of God and who is asking you, you would ask me for a drink and I would give you living water."

"Well," answers the woman, "you have nothing with which to draw the water, and are you trying to tell me that your water is better than that of the great patriarch Jacob who gave us this well?"

Jesus says, "The water I give will quench your thirst for all eternity."

She replies, "Give it to me so I won't be thirsty, or ever have to come back to this well again."

"Go get your husband, and then come back," Jesus instructs her.

"I have no husband."

"You answer truthfully," says Jesus. "For you have had five husbands, and the man you live with now is not your husband."

"Sir," she replies, "I perceive that you are a prophet. Tell me, where is the rightful place to worship, on our Mt. Gerizim or in Jerusalem?"

But Jesus tells her, "That is not important. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

She responds, "I know Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us."

Jesus says to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

A Coast Guard cutter tuned in to a faint distress signal from a sinking pleasure craft. "What is your position? Repeat, what is your position?" shouted the radio operator into the microphone.

Finally, a faint reply crackled over the static, “My position is that I’m executive vice president of First Global Bank. Please hurry!”

Most often in society, people get attention because of their social or occupational position. But Jesus didn’t respond to the woman because of her position, but rather, in spite of it.

“The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’... Jesus said to her, ‘I am he.’”

John’s purpose in writing this gospel is to declare that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the very Son of God. As the last of the four gospels written, it more than the other three forcefully and powerfully makes this point in every story it records. Yet, what is also important and consistent in John’s gospel are the unusual people to whom Jesus offers his love and forgiveness, his new life. For those present that day in Samaria, and for John’s early readers, the shock of this story is not that Jesus offers eternal, living water, but rather the person to whom he offers it. The main character herself expresses the surprise of the readers in verse nine: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

The animosity between the Jews and Samaritans had begun over 700 years earlier. In 722 B.C., the Assyrians conquered the ten northern tribes of Israel, in Samaria, and deported most of them to Assyria. The Assyrians then colonized the area by intermarrying with the remaining Jews. Later, the southern kingdom of the Jews, Judah, was defeated by the Babylonians and the people deported to Babylon. But in 537 B.C., these southern Jews returned from exile in Babylon and began to rebuild Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. The northern Samaritans, who still considered themselves Jews, offered to help. But the southern Jews believed the Samaritans had lost their racial purity, their Jewishness, and rebuffed the offer. The Samaritans then worked to delay the building of the Temple in Jerusalem and eventually constructed their own temple on Mount Gerizim. But in 128 B.C., an army led by the Jewish high priest destroyed the Samaritan Temple on Mt. Gerizim.

So, can you feel the 700 year old animosity of two groups living together in an area barely larger than the state of New Jersey? The Jews saw the Samaritans as half breeds who were religious heretics and should be avoided. The Samaritans viewed the Jews as arrogant and untrustworthy.

Many Jews travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem would not take the direct road south through Samaria, but would travel a longer route through Jordan and bypass Samaritan territory. Those who walked straight through could be harassed by the Samaritans. So, when Jesus says to the woman,

“Give me a drink,” his willingness to address her is bad enough, but to also ask to be able to place his lips on the drinking element she uses is incomprehensible.

But this person being a Samaritan is only the beginning. It gets worse, for she is a woman. One of the prayers Jewish men prayed in the synagogue was, “I thank God I am not a woman.” It was unseemly, bad manners, poor etiquette, disgusting, and dangerous for a man to approach in public a woman he did not know. This is why the woman is caught so off guard by Jesus’ request. Women were possessions of either their fathers or their husbands. They were not free agents. Plus, they were viewed as intellectually, spiritually, and morally inferior to men. They were believed to be emotional, less intelligent, and cursed with that ghastly situation of menstruation, which made them religiously unclean.

Yet, Jesus not only initiates a conversation with this woman, and asks something from her, but enters into a theological discussion with her. If Dr. Phil had been there that day, he would have said to Jesus: “What were you thinking?”

But it gets worse. Not only is she a racially impure, heretical Samaritan and a male dominated, inferior woman, but she is also morally repugnant.

“Go, call your husband...”

“I have no husband.”

“You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.”

John gives us no details here because we don’t need them. This woman has run through five husbands, and this last one she hasn’t even bothered to marry, or maybe this guy isn’t about to marry a woman like her.

When you read the gospels, a reoccurring element, surprise, is the type of people to whom Jesus offers his salvation, living water, the gift of his love and forgiveness. It finds its summary in the charge repeatedly leveled at him: “He eats with tax collectors and sinners.”

Yes, he did, over and over and over again. Zaccheus the tax collector, the woman taken in the very act of adultery, the blind, the lame, all the throwing away people of society Jesus offered new life, a new beginning, an opportunity to draw near to God and experience the riches of God’s presence.

To whom do you and I offer the gospel? What morally deficient, theological inept members of society have we written off? Jesus broke down barriers — social barriers, theological barriers, racial barriers, moral barriers. The ones who refused to hear his words, who rejected him, were

the good religious people of the day. And one of the chief reasons was they could not conceive that God would want to speak to, work with, save, these sinful, disgusting people.

Is that what the Church has become today? Who do we reject as unworthy of the gospel? And do you think Jesus feels the same way?

Some of you will remember Philip Yancey, the well known Christian author, who was our Heritage Lecturer in 2008. Yancey tells about teaching a class at his Chicago church where he was sharing his reflections on what he learned while writing the book, The Jesus I Never Knew.

Yancey observed that the characters that seemed most unsavory were the ones who felt most at ease around Jesus. People who found Jesus most appealing included the Samaritan woman at the well, a traitorous tax collector, one of Herod's military officers and a woman who, until recently, had been possessed by seven demons.

But Jesus received cool receptions from the more respectable people, such as the pious Pharisees who criticized him for being uncouth and worldly, and the rich young ruler who sadly walked away when Jesus demanded that he sell all his goods and give the money to the poor as a prerequisite to following him.

Yancey wrote, "I remarked to the class how strange this pattern seemed, since the Christian church now attracts respectable types who closely resemble the people most suspicious of Jesus on earth." He wondered, "What has happened to reverse the pattern of Jesus' day? Why don't sinners like being around us?"

Do sinners not like being around us because we offer only condemnation instead of a new life in Christ?

"Disgusting"

Everyone agreed this morally lax, theological heretical, inferior woman was disgusting. Everyone except Jesus. Jesus offers her living water, a new life, and her testimony convinces an entire town to believe in Jesus.

Do you and I categorize people by morality, theology, sex, race, or nationality?

Are our interactions with them governed by our prejudices?

Do we really believe Jesus can heal those individuals most people have written off?

Is our Christianity breaking down barriers between people and between God and people?

Or, are we trapped in the sin of believing Jesus came only for us and those like us?

This morning, how many morally lax, theologically heretical, socially inferior Samaritans have you and I offered to share the Church's living water?

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