

Sunday, March 8, 2026
Third Sunday in Lent (Year A)

John 4.5-42

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“Breaking Down Barriers”

Thus far on our Lenten quest, we have met and been led by several guides. The first week, our guide was none other than Jesus himself. And, as I noted last week, in each of the following weeks in Lent, we meet an additional guide. People who, through their encounter with Jesus, learn something about themselves and about their relationship with God. Lessons that, in turn, can help guide us in our own quest to discern, realize, and more fully live into who we are created and called to be—not just in this Lenten season, but in our lives moving forward. Of course, Jesus is the ultimate guide in each encounter we examine, as he guides the one encountered, who, in turn, becomes a guide for us.

Last week, our guide was Nicodemus, an unlikely guide, primarily because of his high-ranking position as a powerful Jewish leader. Despite being a Temple authority, one who because of his encounter with Jesus was able to overcome some limited and rigid perspectives; who out of necessity had to compartmentalize his faith in Jesus, but in time found the courage to ultimately “go public” in his support of Jesus. Today, Nicodemus passes the torch to another, perhaps even more unlikely guide—one who is the polar opposite to Nicodemus in every way: a Samaritan woman.

Before we get to the actual encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, there are a few things we need to understand to fully appreciate the significance of this encounter. And to fully establish the qualifications of this Samaritan woman to be one of our guides on our Lenten quest. To even have this encounter, Jesus literally had to cross into enemy territory. Jesus and the disciples are traveling from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north. These two Jewish regions were separated by a non-Jewish region: Samaria. While once part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, this area had long been the home of the Samaritans. Descendants of generations of intermarriage between Jews left behind during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE and Gentiles the conquering Assyrians settled in Israel when they controlled the area in the eighth century BCE. As a result, the Samaritans shared a common heritage with Jews, but were nonetheless quite different. Over the six centuries since the Babylonian exile, they had developed their own culture and religious practices. While their religion was based on the Torah, as was the Jewish faith, there were differences in practices and in such ideas as to the center of worship: Jews believing it to be the Temple in Jerusalem, and Samaritans believing it to be Mount Gerizim. These cultural and religious differences led to a variety of conflicts over the centuries, with the Samaritans and Jews becoming enemies. The similarities between the two groups adding fuel to the mutual contempt rather than providing a starting point for reconciliation. To the point that, at least for Jews, “Samaritan” became shorthand for “adversary” and “apostate.”

Because of this, Jesus choosing to go through Samaria to get to Galilee was a bold move. And what he does once in Samaria only becomes increasingly bold as time goes by. Reaching the city of Sychar around midday, Jesus and the disciples stop for a lunch break. While the disciples go into the city to get provisions, Jesus stays at the well outside the city. Here, as we heard in the

Gospel, he encounters the Samaritan woman who has come to draw water. While the woman is not given a name—few women are in Scripture—tradition has given this woman a name. The Orthodox Christian tradition gives her the name Photini. More on that later. What ensues between Jesus and Photini is probably one of the longest conversations Jesus has with anyone in the Gospels, outside of his Farewell Discourse with the disciples prior to his Passion. That, in itself, should tell us something of the importance of Photini and of this encounter between her and Jesus.

While the content of the conversation that ensues is important, what is perhaps more striking is that the conversation between Jesus and Photini happens at all. The encounter itself breaks at least two major taboos. The first is against a Jewish religious teacher speaking with a woman in public, particularly an unaccompanied woman. The second is against Jews and Samaritans interacting in such a familiar way as asking to share water. While we may consider such restrictions as archaic, they were the norms of the day and the culture, and as such were generally strictly adhered to. Hence Photini's expression of dismay: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" An innocent question about norms of social behavior giving rise to a significant theological discussion.

There may have been another implied taboo, or if not taboo, at least action that would be looked down upon. That being the implication that this woman might be of questionable repute, having had five husbands and currently living, shall we say, "without benefit of marriage." As such, any respectable man, Jesus included, should steer clear of her. And yet, as with the actual cultural and religious taboos, Jesus does not appear to be interested in judging or condemning her for her relationship history and status. Rather, Jesus is interested in meeting her on equal footing, as a beloved child of God. Regardless of gender. Regardless of religion. Regardless of ethnic or cultural background. Regardless of perceived reputation. Regardless of past or present actions. In many ways, this is the real lesson of the encounter. What follows, while important from a theological perspective, is in some ways just a deepening of relationship that was first made possible because of Jesus' acceptance of Photini for who she is. The entire package. Not getting hung up on limiting social attitudes and behaviors that only serve to divide as opposed to allowing for relationship, and the reconciliation of ancient divisions.

The conversation between Jesus and Photini is reminiscent of that between Jesus and Nicodemus that we looked at last week. Jesus making a metaphorical statement that is initially taken literally, and as a result, is therefore misunderstood. A statement that is a common image that, in the mouth of Jesus, contains deeper truths about relationship with him and with the one true God. "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." In this statement, Jesus is inviting Photini into deeper relationship, with him and with God. Offering the gift of "living water." Of course, as with Nicodemus, Photini misunderstands the original image. For "living water" has two meanings. The more common being "spring water" or "flowing water"—not stagnant like in a pool or a well. And therefore cleaner. But in the mouth of Jesus, "living water" also means "water of life." As Jesus says to Photini, "Everyone who drinks of this water [that is, the water from Jacob's well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing to eternal life." This "living water" being an image for God's never-ending love and grace. This "living water" being an image for deeper relationship with God through Christ that is

truly life-giving in the deepest sense. This “living water” being an image for the eternal life that will only be made possible and available through Jesus’ death and resurrection. And for Christians post-resurrection, this “living water” being an image for baptism: the means of entry into full relationship with God, and entry into the Body of Christ.

Photini responds to Jesus’ invitation: “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” She is making the right request, but for the wrong reason. But she is close. So close. As Jesus tells Photini, “the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The “living water” becoming an image for this worship in spirit and truth. Transcending the cultic divisions that have separated Jew from Samaritan and Gentile. Transcending whatever it is that has separated humankind from God’s love. In this image of “living water,” Jesus is inviting Photini, and calling all of us, to move beyond narrow-minded, restricting, limiting ideas and to embrace broader, deeper images of relationship with God.

In the course of the conversation, Photini seems to have an epiphany. Or at least enough insight to begin connecting the dots. “I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Ding, ding, ding. Give the woman a cup of living water. “Jesus said to her, ‘I am he, the one who is speaking to you.’” With that, Photini’s eyes are completely open. Not only is she transformed by the living water Jesus offers, she is off to share the good news with her fellow Samaritans. And “Many Samaritans from that city believed in [Jesus] because of the woman’s testimony.”

The Orthodox Christian tradition has it that she was baptized by the Apostles on the first Pentecost and given the name Photini, “the enlightened one.” So enlightened because her eyes were opened by her encounter with Jesus. She received the living water Jesus graciously offered her, despite her gender, despite her religion, despite her culture, despite any other personal flaws or indiscretions. In so doing, she was able to see—she was able to embody—the truth of relationship with God. That no barriers exist when it comes to relationship with God. Because of this and her testimony about Jesus, Photini is celebrated in the Orthodox Church as an Evangelist, as “Equal to the Apostles.”

The story of the encounter between Jesus and Photini, as with all our Gospel stories during our Lenten quest, is about seeking to be in deeper relationship with God and with one another. About being open to receiving the “living water” that Jesus offers. The living water of God’s love, of God’s grace, of God’s forgiveness. The living water that provides new and eternal life in him. While this living water is freely offered, Photini’s story shows us that there are often those things in our lives that stand in the way of us accepting and drinking of the living water Jesus offers. Some imposed from outside ourselves, such as gender, culture, and even religious tradition. Some from within ourselves, such as our own images, even shame, about who we are, about what we have done in the past. All of these being barriers of our own making. All of these being immaterial to Jesus in his invitation to give us the “living water” that is new life in him.

Guided by Photini, may we be emboldened and empowered to break down those barriers in our own lives, and to work to help break down those barriers for others, so that we may be refreshed by living water and thereby able to worship God more fully in spirit and truth.