

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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God's New Thing

John 4:3-30 & Exodus 17:1-7

The February 10 reading in the Presbyterian Church's *2008 Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study* is as follows:

Avi, an Israel Jew, and Saleh, a Muslim Palestinian, both 17 years old, visited the World Trade Center site together. As they gazed at Ground Zero, they fell into conversation. Who would become a suicide bomber? If you felt your people were hopelessly oppressed, would you become a freedom fighter? What is the difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist? They decided to postpone the conversation until they could talk to each other at length.

Avi and Saleh are participants in New York City's Auburn Seminary's program Face to Face/Faith to Faith (F2F), which brings teenagers from the Middle East, Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the United States together at a Presbyterian camp in New York state to learn about each others' religious traditions and their relationship to the conflicts in their home countries. The opportunity to talk further came the next day at Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City where a local teenager facilitated a very powerful conversation between Avi and Saleh while members of the church listened.

Where two or three or 60 young people gather to practice respect and build understanding, as they do in Auburn's program, God is there, instructing and teaching....

I would say that this is a demonstration of God's new thing.

We see Jesus doing God's new thing all throughout his ministry. It is truly evident in the Gospel lesson for today. In it we read of Jesus traveling from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, going through Samaria, which was in between. Many Jews at the time of Jesus would have taken the long route between Judea and Galilee so as not to have to travel through Samaria.

Now for a variety of reasons relationships between Jews and Samaritans were not good; actually they were almost as bad as any inter ethnic, tribal, religious and/or racial conflict present in our world today. There was an embittered hatred between Samaritans and Jews. Let me give some background for you. Under King David and his son, King Solomon, the nation of Israel was one. But after Solomon's son, Rehoboam, became King, the country split into the northern kingdom – Israel, and the southern kingdom – Judah. Some 200 years later the northern kingdom was conquered by the country of Assyria. Many of the Israelite people were deported; and the Assyrians settled people from other conquered countries into the former northern kingdom. They became a people of mixed backgrounds and cultural influences, and later, particularly Persian and Greek cultural influences. So the Jews thought of the Samaritans as semi-pagan people of mixed blood.

Samaritans thought of themselves as the true descendants of Israel, who had preserved the ancient ways. Over time, religious beliefs and practices of the people of Samaria and those of Judah

and then of Judea, became a point of contention. The Samaritan scriptures contained just the first five books of the Old Testament. They did not use the prophetic books and the Psalms of the Old Testament. The Samaritans had their own temple built around 300 B.C. on Mt. Gerazim. This shrine competed with the Temple in Jerusalem as a holy site for the worship of God. In 128 B.C. the Samaritans were re-conquered and forcibly 're-Judaized' by the Jewish Maccabean king John Hyrcanus, who destroyed their rival temple.

In John 4, added to this breach between Jews and Samaritans, is the outrageous behavior of Jesus, considered to be a Rabbi, a religious teacher. Jewish custom of the time was that, out in public, the only woman a man would speak to was his wife. A Rabbi seldom spoke to any woman in public. They believed it was wrong to waste their precious teaching on a woman. So here we have a man, a Rabbi, speaking to a woman – not his wife – a female member of an enemy people, known only as a foreign woman, in a very public place, the village well, and he asks her for a drink. This was a radical affront to the social norms of the time.

This Samaritan woman, unnamed in the text, responds to Jesus breaking of societal customs. "How is it that you, a Jew, (and, of course, a man) ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" The text goes on to make it clear that Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans. Jewish men were not accustomed to asking anything from a Samaritan – and even worse, a Samaritan woman. A "good" Jew would not think of asking a Samaritan for a drink of water. This was because the Jews observed certain religious cultic purity laws, and had to obey certain ritual prescriptions that the Samaritans did not observe and obey. A man could dirty himself simply by touching, and much more by drinking from a vessel the woman touched.

Kurt R. Schuermann wrote, "The woman responds to Jesus' request for a drink in a manner that was typical of a Samaritan in the 1st century. She knew how Jewish rabbis regarded Samaritan women. If a rabbi would not waste his precious teaching on her, why should she waste her time providing cool water on a hot day?"

Justo Gonzalez takes this one step further, "The woman has classified herself – 'a Samaritan woman' – and Jesus – 'a Jew'. For all purposes relevant to that occasion, she thought that this sufficed. She wore a label that did not match the label she put on Jesus, so that should have been the end of the matter. ... Although Jesus is indeed a Jew, the woman's label does not suffice. Jesus tells her that he is beyond any such label."

Robert P. Gardner wrote, "Her custom and training to keep her distance from Jews blinded her to the reality of God. Many times we miss God's truth and blessing for our lives through preconceived attitudes and opinions. Instead, the good news of God's love that Jesus brought to a hurting and broken world was for everybody. This encounter shows the inclusive spirit of God's love to all humans. God so loving the world is not just a theory. Here it is seen in action."

We see in John 4 that the usual barriers of religious background, national origins, or gender did not stop Jesus from encountering others with his word. The human barriers of social distinction and mean prejudice lost their force in this encounter between Jesus & the Samaritan woman. The disciples didn't get this yet, for we read that they were 'astonished' to find Jesus in a public place in conversation with a woman, a foreign woman, a woman of questionable character. Their unspoken reactions reflected traditional cultural and social conventions and expectations. Jesus never allowed himself to be restrained by these expectations and conventions. He did not allow boundaries – those between a man and a woman, and between 'chosen people' and 'rejected people' - to interfere with his

ministry. Jesus accepted this person who was disdained as a woman and as a Samaritan by Jews, and as a disreputable person among her own people.

Here in Springfield we can be part of God's new thing as the 100 year anniversary of the 1908 Springfield Race Riot is being commemorated with a series of events that focus on the spiritual themes of reconciliation and healing. We are being asked to focus on the timeless spiritual truths that unite us rather than those that divide us. We are being called upon humbly to reach up to God to receive God's forgiveness and to freely reach across all races giving and receiving forgiveness. Just as Jesus did not dramatize nor dwell on the past of the Samaritan woman, so the focus of the special monthly services of prayer and remembrance, held on the first Saturday of each month, is not to dramatize the dark, divisive events that took place in 1908 but to acknowledge the progress that has been made since then.

These services and other events are a contemporary call for us, as Sarah Lisherness has written, "to seek to see the world through the eyes of the Creator that we may discover that the image of God is to be found in all people. No one has been created superior or inferior. No one is loved by God any more or less – regardless of race, gender, class, age, culture, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or any other distinction", such as legal or illegal alien."

God's new things transcends any and all barriers that divide and hurt people. Written in 1980, John W. Wilson's words that are hymn #436 – "We Are Your People" – illustrate this thought:

We are Your people: Lord, by Your grace,
You dare to make us Christ to our neighbors
of every nation and race.
Called to portray You, help us to live
Closer than neighbors, open to strangers,
able to clash and forgive.
Glad of tradition, Help us to see
In all life's changing where You are leading,
Where our best efforts should be.
Joined in community, breaking Your bread,
May we discover gifts in each other,
willing to lead and be led.
Lord, as we minister in different ways,
May all we're doing show that You're living,
meeting Your love with our praise. Amen.