

WALLS & BOUNDARIES

John 4: 5-30, 39-42

Let me tell several stories... June had come to see me one afternoon in the church office. She had been an elder for many years and had struggled with her mental health. While her family were there for her only sporadically, her youngest daughter, Stacy, was the one solid presence of loving support in her life. But now there was a rift in the family. Why? Stacy had come out and told the family she was gay. The family were all judgement. But June couldn't and wouldn't judge. Stacy was an incredibly loving and beautiful human being, a gifted teacher and a devoted daughter. If she was gay she was still a child of God. How could God judge her? She wanted to know what I thought as her minister...

Amadi and his family had come from Calgary. But originally, they hailed from Ethiopia. Amadi was a political scientist by profession and his doctoral thesis was focused on the historical conflict among his people. Amadi was part of the Oromo tribe. But the tribe that had exercised the most power in Ethiopia was the Amhara. There was a lot of animosity between the Oromo and Amhara. Amadi's research, however, had exposed the fact that historically, both tribes had emerged from a common ancestry and therefore were really family. His work was intended to foster some ground for forgiveness and reconciliation. But a lot of Amadi's friends and kin who were Oromo were furious with him. He was even treated as an outsider in his own ethnic church. And so, he had found a home in the congregation I was leading. The hate between tribes was something that could not be overcome easily and anyone who fostered that kind of reconciliation was a traitor and an enemy of his people... Amadi wanted to know what the bible really said...

The first time I met Bobby he was dressed in filthy clothes and he smelled. He had come to the church looking for a hand out and something to eat. After settling him down I tried to get something of his story. He was very cautious. Even as he was desperate to get help, churches had been negative spaces for him. Typically, church people dismissed him, or tried to psycho-analyze him, or judge him, or give him a little money making him promise he wouldn't use it for drugs or booze. Some even asked him to do work for pay. That didn't always work out well as Bobby had some serious mental health challenges and keeping on task was an issue. When he failed to complete the job it only perpetuated the judgement that he was a lazy bum who didn't deserve help.

I decided to help him with a little bit of money and food. We chatted some more and then he told me his story. It was one of childhood abuse and neglect and then some undiagnosed mental health condition that prevented him from ever holding down a job long enough to get any stable income. And so, he was on the street, going from place to place, shelter to

shelter, living on the edge. One Sunday he came to church. I told him I could only see him after the service. He stayed for the service. People were immediately cautious around him. We had had some burglaries at the church. Suspicion was rampant. He came into coffee hour. I could see that most everyone was avoiding him. There were the obvious barriers – Bobby was dirty and smelly. But there was also something else... Was it contempt? I felt discouraged. How could we ever be a real church if someone like Bobby couldn't feel welcomed? How would I work with the congregation on this?...

Kun Sil was a theological student from Korea. His English was pretty poor, but his goal was to work in an English-speaking congregation. Why? He could no longer feel at home in a Korean-speaking one. Why? The churches he knew were very conservative and very exclusive in their views. What did he mean? He told me the story of his family. Kun Sil had several siblings and his father was still living. But his father and the rest of the family didn't speak to one another. Why? Kun Sil's father was traditional. He maintained his roots in ancestor worship and Confucianism. Kun Sil's older brother had converted to Christianity and the Christianity he was part of in Korea believed that ancestor worship was Satanic, immoral and condemned by God. Unless their father rejected such worship, they could no longer be family.

Kun Sil himself had also become a Christian and he looked up to his older brother. But he also came to see the meaning of his father's beliefs. Wasn't respect and reverence for one's ancestors and belief in their ongoing presence in one's life similar to what we Christians confessed as the Communion of Saints? And even if his brother's Christianity did not subscribe to more Catholic or Orthodox forms of veneration of saints, Protestants still believed that the true church was invisible, beyond all time and space where all God's people live in perpetual communion. But Kun Sil's brother not only rejected Kun Sil's point of view. He threatened Kun Sil. If he accepted what his father was doing, he, too, would be cut off. And so, Kun Sil found himself seeking his own path, cut off from his family but still in touch with his father, a father who was not a Christian, and yet one who alone was the family Kun Sil had. Would our brand of Protestantism at the church accept the validity of ancestor worship and Confucian wisdom?...

OK, one more story: Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. To get there, they have to pass through a territory called Samaria. Samaritans are historic enemies of the Jews. The conflict goes back centuries. Jews believe they are pure and that Samaritans are mixed race. Jews have their sacred places and Samaritans have theirs. Who's right? Who's wrong? Jews and Samaritans just stay out of each other's way.

But here comes Jesus walking through Samaritan territory. And John's gospel takes up a whole chapter telling the story of an encounter Jesus has. Why? Well, clearly it has to be important. Clearly this encounter and the story told has to be vital in telling us what Jesus is

about and what he is teaching. So what is it? Well, before we get to the content of the interaction Jesus has with a woman he meets, we need to note some pretty thick walls and clear cut boundaries Jesus is confronting. First, he is in Samaritan territory and he is speaking to a Samaritan person. Any friendliness toward a Samaritan will make him suspect if he expects his people, the Jews, to follow him.

Second, he is speaking to a woman. Men and women don't just refrain from talking to one another in public spaces unless they are family or spouse; no. Jesus is talking to this woman as a person with her own mind, her own feelings and her own experiences. Jesus is communicating some deep things about himself and he's sharing it all with whom? - a woman! This is a no-no on many levels.

Finally, as the conversation unfolds it becomes clear that this woman has been married many times. Why? We don't know. The men in her life have either died, divorced or abandoned her and the man she's currently attached to has not even honoured her with a formal marriage commitment. This is a time when women are not independently employed and cannot own property. They are property of men – a father, a husband, and if widowed, a brother. So even though Jesus is talking to her as a human being with incredible value, she would be seen as someone highly tainted, flawed and therefore, possessing few rights.

And what about the content of Jesus' message? He's asking her for water to drink. But this is a hook. What Jesus wants, ultimately, is to reveal himself to her. Clearly Jesus sees something in her of heart and soul, something of infinite value. Even though she is a Samaritan, a woman, and a flawed human being as far as everyone else is concerned, Jesus crosses all boundaries and breaks down all the walls to choose to reveal himself to this woman. Rather than reveal himself to someone of high status in his world; rather than reveal himself to someone of high moral standing like a head Pharisee or high priest; Jesus chooses to reveal himself to someone totally discredited in that world.

So what does Jesus reveal to her? He reveals to her that water is not just a physical source of refreshment. Water is also a metaphor for an inner kind of refreshment, the kind of refreshment that quenches thirst of a spiritual kind. So what water is he talking about? Think about Jesus' actions? By crossing all boundaries and breaking down all the walls to reveal himself to this woman, Jesus is revealing what God's love is all about. Transformation through God's love is experiencing being loved totally, fully, completely, past all those walls and boundaries of social judgement. We show judgement and contempt toward others or we internalize such judgement and contempt by seeing ourselves through the critical eyes of others and then loathing parts of who we are.

Jesus' embodied revelation of God's total love for this woman will be the beginning of rich inner transformation for her. He reveals to her that he knows her personal situation with

multiple marriages and multiple failures in her relationships. But that makes no difference to his sharing love with her. He then tells her that her being a Samaritan and him being a Jew and the competing places of worship they have are meaningless walls between them. True worship is an inner, spiritual thing, not a place. It is about love, and true love has no walls.

Such love revealed and embodied toward her then so empowers the woman that she goes out and publicly declares Jesus as the true messiah others of her own people must encounter too. And so it is. Others come to Jesus and they experience his love past the walls and boundaries there would be between them. They tell the woman: “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.”

So what makes Jesus truly the saviour of the world? It is not about the Jesus of Christianity versus other religions. It is not about the Jesus of orthodox morality versus impure and morally compromised persons. It is not about the Jesus of the hard working and well to do versus those who are messed up and irresponsible human beings. It is not about the Jesus of certain races or cultures superior to others. It is a Jesus who embodies total love, which then leads to transformation of people beginning with their hearts. And once people begin the journey of inner transformation, they are inspired to become the hands, feet and heart of Jesus in the world.

So how did Jesus’ embodied revelation of divine love shape my response to the people in my stories? I told June that I totally embraced her choice to embrace her daughter who was gay and that her daughter would always be a beloved member of any congregation of which I was minister... Amadi and I studied the bible and he discovered the beauty of Jesus’ sermon on the mount and how forgiveness and reconciliation between enemies was not only what Jesus taught as God’s dream, but embodied even on a cross... Bobby didn’t stop coming to church from time to time. It’s always for a handout, but it’s also for some conversation and laughter too. Who knows Bobby’s future. But at least he knows that even though churches are places with people who have their flaws, God’s love lives there too. And finally, Kun Sil. He’s still not reconciled with his brother and family in Korea. But he’s still close to his father. They may not practice the same religion, but they share respect and gratitude for their ancestors...

So what about you and me? Where are the walls and boundaries in our lives? Think about a relationship in your life... Think about a particular person or group or issue where you feel judgement rise up within you? What is it that blocks you or fills you with resentment or contempt? Is there a better way to create more space in you for living water to fill you up? Perhaps it’s all about renewing your recognition of all the boundaries and walls God’s love must cross and break down to get into your own heart...

We are listening, O God; **Speak to us!** Amen.