

WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON THEN

John 4:5-41
27 March 2011

So who knows, maybe she was the Elizabeth Taylor of her day. We have no way of knowing. She had five husbands Jesus says and she agrees. She is living with a man now who is not her husband. We don't know who he is, though. He may be a male relative, son or brother or uncle. She may have been so hard pressed for survival that none of those is right and she is co-habiting for no reason other than survival. Let those who have never starved throw the first stone. All of that, for today, at least, are beside the point. Today the conversation focuses on three possible spiritual lives, fenced in faith, tetherball theology and relational religion. The Samaritan woman explores all three as she and Jesus talk.

She, this unnamed woman of the village begins where so many of us begin. She starts with a fenced-in faith. Samaritan woman: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans. John helpfully editorializes.)

There we have the first type of strong fences. The woman is a Samaritan. Jesus is a Jew. They have nothing to do with each other. The two groups hate each other. Each group believes the other to be traitors to the faith, the race and God. Jews and Samaritans have nothing to do with each other. That is a fence. The fence is not simply ethnicity, the fence is faith based.

Both of those communities sprang from the Israel and Judah of pre-Babylon. Samaritans are left behind during years of conquest and exile. They develop specific ideas about the faith history, where to worship and how. They and the Jewish exiles who return are in conflict almost from the start. Both groups develop strong fences around their faith. The woman is a Samaritan. That means her faith is expressed in a certain way. She and the Jews among whom she and her people live both build fences to keep themselves from wandering away. Fences have a role. But have you ever seen children at a fenced in playground? Where do they gather?



Children, the curious, the interested always gather at the fence. "Wonder what is over there?" they say. "Mister, can you throw our ball back?" "Can you reach that four leaf clover just outside the fence?" In trying to get what is good and desirable and just beyond his reach, Beaver Clever gets his head stuck in a fence in one episode of *Leave it to Beaver*. We don't like fences.

Fences divide us. She is a Samaritan and he a Jew. She is a woman and he a man. Women and men do not talk in public unless immediate family. Fences keep us apart. Fences are attractive at the same time as they divide us. We don't like fences. Our fences are so normal, so much a [part of the landscape, we like the Samaritan woman, don't see them. If we did we would not put up with them.





*Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above,
Don't fence me in.
Let me ride through the wide open country that I love,
Don't fence me in.
Let me be by myself in the evenin' breeze,
And listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees,
Send me off forever but I ask you please,
Don't fence me in.¹*

“How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” That is a fence however we ask the question. How is it that you, a Baptist, ask something from me, a Methodist? You are a Protestant, I’m a Catholic. I am Christian you are Muslim. You are gay, I am straight. You are black I am white, and on and on. Fenced-in faith keeps us from retrieving the four leaf clover, the ball we lost, the truth we may have forgotten, the insight we need. Fenced-in faith keeps us from welcoming the newcomer, greeting the stranger, making amends with a friend, forgiving yourself. Fenced-in faith is inflexible, unmovable, and ultimately intolerant. Jesus does not respect our fenced-in faith.

“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.” Jesus enters our fenced-in area, certainly. Jesus also enters the fenced-in faith of others. There he establishes truth and reveals grace and offers life giving water in the ways each tribe and cluster can accept. And when we are thirsty and Jesus offers us water that is not normally found in our little fenced in area, will we accept his gift or die of thirst? Fenced-in faith denies life. Jesus offers truth from beyond our fences. The fences fall. So, some of us retreat to a tetherball theology.



Tetherball is a wonderful game. At Willow Park near where I grew up, we did not have to have a fenced-in playground. We had a tetherball game. Tetherball consists of a metal pole with a rope that can swing 360 degrees at the top. At the other end of the rope is a ball. The point is to hit the ball so that the rope winds all the way around the pole in *your* direction before your opponent can do the same in *his* direction. A good game of tetherball keeps children occupied for hours. Playgrounds with tetherball seldom need fences. That is good because such playgrounds seldom have fences. The Samaritan woman, her fenced-in faith broken, retreats to tetherball theology to keep Jesus at arm’s reach. Tetherball theology, you see, does not look to the fence line, the edges, and the margins of faith. Tetherball theology focuses attention inward, to a central point, to the one unmovable, unchangeable Truth with a capital t.



“Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks, drank from it?” That is an example of tetherball theology. Jacob gave us this well. Jacob is the one we will love and follow and model ourselves on. Jacob matters. This line also reveals the problem with tetherball theology. We can seldom agree what is the one, absolute truth that must be maintained, must be the central point of faith.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLoYFvbROXY>

The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Now there are two points of discussion. Is the central issue the greatness of Jacob or is the central point the place of worship? What is the central point that must focus our attention in modern tetherball theology? We have too many contenders. God is One; God is three persons. God is merciful; God is just. Jesus is fully human; Jesus is fully divine. The Book of Discipline is correct in all ways; the Book of Discipline must be interpreted by the Judicial Council. Newcomers must live by our rules; newcomers are full members of the family or they are not in the family at all. Tetherball theology distracts us from all the wonders of the world and demands that we focus everything on one point, one place, one truth.

Institutional leaders will try to keep their power and their place by telling you, there are no other games than tetherball. “Certainly,” say those whose identity is totally a part of their office, “there are no better games.” Tetherball theology wants to keep you looking at just one thing so that you will miss all the blessings, all the good that God desires for you to have and enjoy.



An author I read as a boy taught me an important lesson about those rules and the leaders who make them. “When any government, or any church for that matter, undertakes to say to its subjects, This you may not read, this you must not see, this you are forbidden to know, the end result is tyranny and oppression no matter how holy the motives.” (Robert A. Heinlein²). Jesus will not accept that restriction.

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water 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 up to eternal life.” Jesus says that his water, the truth of life in him, is never inward focused only. A life in Christ becomes a life that gushes water for everyone who will drink.

The well becomes a stream. The stream becomes a river, the river feeds a lake and soon there is enough water, enough life, and enough truth for everyone to receive, enjoy and grow. In Christ we are no longer focused on one truth only because in him we see all the truths of life pour out for our benefit. The tetherball no longer holds our attention. Refreshed and full of life we journey farther and search for all the other good things God provides.



The Samaritan woman reaches past the fence. She slips out the wall. A fenced-in faith no longer works for her. The Samaritan woman is cured of the blindness that made her think worship had to happen only in one place, one way, in one mode and one language. Tetherball may be fun, but it is no longer the only game in the playground. She wants to tell other the great good news. She wants this new life.

The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” Here is where Jesus offers her and us a better way. We are offered relational religion.

“God is spirit,” Jesus says, “and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_A._Heinlein

you.” Truth is not found in propositions. Faith is not located in a building. Religion is not built on restrictions.

A little girl asked her mother, 'How did the human race come about?' “God made Adam and Eve,” said mother. “And they had children and so all humankind was made.” Two days later the little girl asks her father the same question. “Many years ago there were monkeys,” said dad, “And we developed from them.” The confused girl went back to her mother. “Mom,” she asked, “how is it possible that you told me the human race was created by God and dad says we developed from monkeys?” “It’s very simple, dear. I told you about the origin of my side of the family, and your father told you about his side.” Relational religion allows us to laugh at that. Fenced in faith would have us divide into camps who must be right and who must be wrong. Tetherball theology would have us focus on the details and have us miss the larger issues of learning, husbands and wives, humor and the give and take of life. Relational religion lets us enjoy the message behind the words.

Jesus reaches out to the Samaritan woman. Before she is aware or ready, he speaks to her as an equal and offers her a relationship. Jesus does not put her in a category. He does not relate to her as a stereotype. He does not fence her in with prejudices or presuppositions. He speaks. He answers. He offers with open hands and open heart. Jesus presents us with a question.

Whose side are we on? We can live behind fences. We can spend time trimming the grass between the bars and scrapping and painting the bars. Or we can focus on one point only and ignore all the other gifts here for us. We can divide the world into us and them. We can play one game over and over. Those actions limit us. Those attitudes restrict our experience of God and each other. Jesus offers us more. Jesus offers us a world to explore, to learn from and to grow in. Whose side are you on? Fences have a place. Tetherball is fun. Relationships give us growth, life and hope. A healthy, mature belief offers a life giving relationship between the God of all creation and you and your other sojourners. Others demand division or isolation. Whose side are you on?

