

Remembering Whose we are—Finding and being found
Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday: Following Jesus together across barriers
John 4:1–42

“Following Jesus together across barriers.” This is the invitation given to us from our faith family for this Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday.

It’s pretty normal for us to talk about following Jesus, but this invitation invites us to do it together. Not just together here at FoH. Or just Mennonite Church USA. But *with* our sister congregations around the globe...with *them* we follow Jesus. We aren’t doing this separately, but together. Together touching hands and spirits around the globe, *together* following Jesus across barriers.

This is *such* an appropriate invitation for our time. This invitation, issued in the middle of a pandemic, invites us to see barriers that we might have missed a year ago. And now that we see them, we need to name them and cross them...together.

At first glance, on a World Fellowship Sunday, barriers appear to be the different nations and national boundaries. The barriers of distance and time zones. Of language and culture. There are also the physical barriers such as the wall between Mexico and the US. And the separation wall in Palestine/Israel. Lots of barriers to cross.

And we haven’t even begun to mention the barriers *within* a nation where we share language and culture among other things. There are the political barriers. Theological barriers. The barriers of gender and sexuality, of race and white supremacy. How do we keep holding on to each other’s hands and spirits across so many barriers?

And at the micro level...there are the personal and interpersonal barriers. My guess is that most of us have *some* barriers in *some* of our relationships...places where we just don’t go, for whatever reason, because we’ve decided or learned that it’s best to stay out. And here at FoH, we have a growing sense of a barrier between the Apostolic Order and newer folks,

and between different hopes and visions for our beloved community. How, dear God, how can we respond to this invitation to join hands and spirits around the globe and *together* follow Jesus across so many physical and social and psychological barriers?

We begin by finding and seeing Jesus.

This story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman begins with Jesus crossing a barrier. As a Jewish man, he should have avoided Samaria. Faithful Jews wouldn't have entered into Samaria. Instead of crossing that ancient barrier, they would have gone around its borders. But Jesus walked right through the middle of Samaria.

This reminds me of a sign that Rod Roberson put above his office door when he was Executive Director at Church Community Services. "You are entering Samaria," the sign reads. He refers to South Central Elkhart as Samaria because there are white people that bypass this part of town. The barriers of prejudice and racism have many white people afraid of driving through.

In Jesus' refusal to bypass Samaria, in his assumption that, of course, he would go through Samaria, we see and learn that one way we, together with sisters and brothers around the globe, one way we cross barriers is simply by crossing them! The barrier into Samaria wasn't physical, wasn't a dividing wall. Instead, it was a barrier constructed by social and theological and historical and traditional and all-kinds-of-other things. It worked as a barrier because there was a collective agreement. And it was handed down from one generation to the next.

But Jesus didn't accept the agreement. In fact, he had no regard or consideration for it. It was as though the barrier didn't exist. Jesus had been named, Beloved. He was found and seen by God. And Jesus in turn, saw and found his human siblings as equally beloved wherever and everywhere they were!

We follow Jesus together across barriers when we see and find each other as God's beloved. In the family of God's beloved, within God's beloved creation, we are one. With equal value. Every body equally worthy. We're different; we're varied; we're diverse in our cultures and beliefs and theologies, but we are all, equally, God's.

Fellowship of Hope has a long history of learning this...beginning as we followed Jesus across the barriers of racism into South Central Elkhart and made our homes here. This congregation continues to join hands and spirits with our siblings in this community, throughout the country, and around the globe...as together we cross the barriers of racism, white privilege, and white supremacy.

There are several other things about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman that teach us how to follow him together across barriers. When Jesus arrives at the well, he sits down. When a woman from the village comes to the well for water, Jesus asks her for water. Now, considering that he's hot, tired, thirsty, and hungry this may not seem remarkable. But if we slow it down, if we look closely, there are several remarkable things happening. In the social context of Jesus' day, women were property. Their place in society was at the bottom of the social ladder. By talking with a woman, Samaritan or not, Jesus has crossed more barriers. But, without hesitation, Jesus talks to her. Out of a habitual *dis*regard for barriers, and out of a habitual *reg*ard for seeing and finding God's beloved, Jesus recognizes and engages this woman as a fully human sibling.

Notice another detail: that Jesus is sitting. And the woman, ready to draw water, is standing. In the physical space, he is lower than the woman. By staying seated, Jesus is giving her an advantage, or a preference, in the space. Jesus is looking up to her...and she is looking down on him. Not only has Jesus crossed a barrier, but he's created equity between them. So secure is Jesus in his identity as God's beloved, that he ceded his physical and

social position and power to her. With no concern that he might be diminished. There was nothing for him to hold on to or defend.

His actions aren't calling attention to himself; it isn't arrogance or self-righteousness. Instead, his actions reflect a habit. It is his habit to remember Whose he is. So in this encounter, Jesus remembers in his mind and body and being that he and this woman are both seen and found by God, are both named, Beloved. And from this habitual remembering, remembering deeply imbedded in his body and bones, we see and learn something else about crossing barriers: Jesus needs this woman. Quenching his thirst depends on her.

Here is Jesus, the Christ, needing something and asking for it. It's a humble and unassuming entry into the relationship and conversation that follows between two equals, two beloved children of God.

We follow Jesus together across barriers when we see and engage others with equity and justice. To be equal with this woman—to recognize that she too, is named, Beloved—Jesus needed to do *more* than just treat her as an equal. By sitting while she was standing, by needing her help, by “lowering” himself, he established equity in their relationship. He was aware of the barriers of injustice that existed in the space, and he took actions to dismantle them.

Following Jesus together across barriers means that we need to know what and where the barriers are, not just our own, but the ones that exist for others. So when it comes to barriers of racism, we who are white will be able to cross them, together, when we habitually see and recognize the barriers and take actions to dismantle them. For example, as a white woman I can, physically and socially, cede my privilege and power; I can listen and learn rather than talking and assuming I have something to say or teach; I can follow instead of trying to lead.

The encounter with Jesus transformed the Samaritan woman. And the barriers that had kept her from thriving crumbled. And she was so delighted that she had been found and seen, and named Beloved, that she couldn't help but share her joy with her community.

May we remember, as a habit—in our bodies and minds and spirits—remember that *every body* we encounter is God's beloved. Just as we are God's beloved.

May we practice, until it becomes habitual, looking for barriers so that we can join our hands and spirits and together, follow Jesus across barriers.

May we, habitually, join our hands and spirits so that together...no one first and no one last...but together...side by side...journey into the fullness of God's Kingdom. A Kingdom where all bodies, all life, thrive in love and equity and justice.

May it be so.