

John 4:1-30

Bold Over Barriers

The stories about the terrible earthquake this week in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere have been difficult to watch. Because Haiti is geographically so close to us and perhaps because there are so many Haitian Americans and so many legal and illegal Haitian aliens in our nation, and because their government is so hopelessly ineffective; their plight has really touched the hearts of most of our nation. It is perhaps also an embarrassment that a nation in such abject poverty has languished in suffering for so many years while being in such proximity to the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation; the United States.

It was heartening to talk to so many of our members this week and to hear their concern for our neighbors in Haiti. It was moving, satisfying and comforting to know that the conversation in our church was about what and when we are going to do; not for a moment about whether we were going to do something. I hope that we all generously support this special offering and I hope that we all take comfort in the knowledge that our One Great Hour of Sharing offerings have sped relief to that nation even before the Presbyterian Church USA called for a new and special offering for Haiti.

I think the national media have been right to focus their coverage on this story. We all have been exposed to facts and stories we really didn't want to know but that we needed to know. It was also terribly disheartening that part of the national media coverage involved giving attention to the despicable, unchristian and un American remarks of the Reverend Pat Robertson and radio commentator Rush Limbaugh. Their moral turpitude is only exceeded by their gross insensitivity. It is not my place to elaborate on their failure as citizens; it is my call to point out how far they fall from the vision and example of Christ Jesus.

Rev. Pat Robertson stated that the people of Haiti were "cursed" because they "got together and swore a pact with the devil" to earn their independence from France. It is clear that he sees the earthquake as a punishment from God. What's not clear is whether Robertson was only being a racist. Since most Haitians are Catholic, he could well have been damning Catholics in addition to people of African descent. The callousness of his words betrays his supposedly caring tone. Rush Limbaugh took a different tact. Limbaugh went after the President instead of the Haitians. Here's a recent quote "Yes, I think in the Haiti earthquake, ladies and gentlemen — in the words of Rahm Emanuel — we have another crisis

simply too good to waste. This will play right into Obama's hands. He's humanitarian, compassionate. They'll use this to burnish their, shall we say, "credibility" with the black community — in the both light-skinned and dark-skinned black community in this country. It's made-to-order for them.”

On the eve of our national holiday to honor Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Democrats Harry Reid and former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich are also in the news for their racially charged comments. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid privately told two journalists in 2008 that Obama was more electable because he's "light-skinned" and lacked a "Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one." Rod Blagojevich told esquire magazine recently that he was “blacker” than Obama. He does have really wild untamed black hair but that's not what he meant. It wasn't long before both men has offered apologies for their remarks.

The Robertson and Limbaugh quotes are blatantly racist and truly scary because of the significant constituency they both have. The Blagojevich quote was I'm afraid characteristically bizarre and stupid. The Reid quote was insensitive and poorly worded; but all four quotes remind us that we have a ways to go in our nation before we can say that racism has been eliminated in mainstream America. Even though we have elected

our first African American President, even though we have made many steps forward the issue of racism is not behind us. We still have barriers that must be bowled over.

Jesus didn't have much use for barriers. When he sits down at that well with the woman from Samaria and he calls himself "living water" he is bold over barriers all over the place. I know we know that Jesus had no use for the stench of stale stereotypes, but a quick rereading of this story may help us all get our bearings in this week of humanitarian crises and racial insensitivity.

For generations, The Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans hated the Jews; but Jesus didn't. In first century, in both Israel and Samaria, men treated women as inferior; but Jesus didn't have it in him. In those days rabbis especially did not even talk to women or Samaritans in public, but Jesus did. Jesus was bold over barriers. He would not let racial, religious or gender concerns be an obstruction to recognizing the full humanity and the integral worth of any person. Just the opposite, Jesus saw himself as a liberator of rigid minds and frigid hearts. He saw himself as one sent to quench the thirst of a world thirsty for love. Racism, Sexism, religious discrimination persecution of Gays and Lesbians - these are

parched dry lonely values that take us away from the effervescent richness of the love of God.

Jesus didn't have any use for customs based on hate and so he spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well. Any Good Jew of the first century knew that the Samaritans were heretics. They weren't worth talking to and probably smelled. They were scorned and avoided. The animosity between Samaritan and Jew was severe. It was somehow related to the exile upon which I preached last week. When the exile ended and the leaders of the southern part of Israel came back a generation after they were deported, they scorned the people from the northern part of Israel who had intermarried with the invaders. These people to the north became known as the Samaritans. The Samaritans were suspect because they used only the first five books of the Bible as their scripture. They ignored the prophets and they ignored the importance of the temple in Jerusalem. They had their own temple on Mount Gerizim and they thought they were doing fine. For the Jews this all added up to heresy - which led to hate. For Jesus this animosity was ridiculous and he boldly asks the Samaritan woman for water.

Secondly this midday nameless visitor to the well was a woman. Jesus lived in a time of gross sexism. Patriarchal ancient Israel was fairly brutal on

women; nothing neat and tidy like the glass ceilings that women hit in the professional world of the twenty first century. In Jesus' day men simply didn't strike up conversations with women in public. You wouldn't stoop so low. You wouldn't talk to women because you were taught that it wasn't worth your time. In fact there were rabbinical teachings that declared a man should not even talk to his wife in public. These customs and traditions by the way did not exist to protect women from strange men. This practice of not talking to women was to ensure that a man was not dishonored. A woman's voice was considered seductive. It might lead a righteous man astray and yet Jesus was bold over barriers engages the female stranger in conversation.

Thirdly, first century rabbinical thinking was rather conservative in regards to woman and faith. It was believed in many circles and I kid you not - that it was better to burn the scriptures than to teach them publicly to a woman. Sunday school for girls would not have made sense to them. The most outrageous part of Rabbi Jesus' irrational conduct was striking up a theological conversation with this low life female Samaritan of dubious moral character. To talk faith with women, to speak of God and scriptures, to offer grace and forgiveness, to squander living water on a heretic, to debate the

finer points of theology and faith like she was a peer whose opinion was valid; this bordered on the absurd. It was frivolous, erratic and heretical behavior and -- it was vintage Jesus flowing at his best, for he was bold over barriers. This wasn't the first woman whom Jesus called disciple. Martha and Mary were his dear friends. There were several woman in his inner circle.

When the disciples came back from doing the marketing in down town Sychar; and witness his friendship with a Samaritan women, the jaws of the twelve hit the sandy road with an astonished clunk. Jesus bowled over their "isms" and cleansed their prejudiced palates with waters of grace and love. Jesus couldn't have cared less about the crusty cruel customs of the day. He did not come to make idols of institutions, he came to abolish absolutes that were grounded in the merely familiar. He came to wash away hate with the living loving water of baptism. Jesus deliberately and flagrantly violated the common codes. His Gospel was a Gospel of acceptance. As hated as the Samaritans were by the Jews, as unusual as it was for a rabbi to place himself in such a position; Jesus' new ways of ministering bubbles over and he chatters with this woman like she was an old acquaintance. His Gospel was a Gospel of warmth and the disciples again find themselves astonished

at the wideness of his mercy and the intensity of his love.

This bold leap over societal and religious bias and barrier set a river of love into motion that was contagious. We read later in the Gospel of John that many Samaritans believed in Jesus because of her testimony. Upon receiving a taste of this bold over barrier living water, this outcast of a nameless Samaritan women turns into a minister and evangelist. One minute, the disciples were astonished that Jesus was talking to a women and the next thing you know - she was doing their work. Perhaps that is part of their astonishment.

Racism is a tricky foe. There are skin heads, Klans and hate groups whose ignorant blind loathing of those who are different is obvious, mostly rejected, although sometimes tolerated. There is however in all cultures an undercurrent of assumptions about those who are outside of us and different from us. This internal blindness is difficult to spot because we are surrounded by people of similar perspective. Those of us in the majority are not near as sensitive to the complexities and power of oppression as those who are behind or put down. Those of us who are economically advantaged are not acutely conscious of the challenges that poorer people face in Haiti or the United States. The whole idea that we should just tell people on the

bottom of the economic and social ladder that all they need to do is pick themselves up by the bootstraps and stand tall is a callous moronic dismissal of a tremendous heart breaking cultural divide. When we spent a week with homeless folk in our own church we bowled over barriers and I think we learned that homelessness is nowhere near as simple as people on the left and the right sometimes make it sound.

The bombast of Limbaugh and Blagojevich is as disgusting and regrettable as it legendary. The carelessness of Reid shows us we have work to do. The utter poverty of Rev. Robertson's remark's in my mind places him in double jeopardy. He is as clueless about racism as he is about the Gospel. He is either clueless or a snarling wolf in sheep's clothing.

God does not use natural disasters to punish people.

God does not punish nations for the sins of a few citizens.

God is Grace. God is Love. God is weeping with the people of Haiti and holding them in his arms.

God is made known to us in Christ Jesus who bowled over barriers because he was bold over barriers.

Natural disasters are not acts of God