

Sunday, March 23, 2014: John 4:5-42

Jesus chooses a circumstance of division, then instigates community.

by [Brian K. Blount](#) in the [March 19, 2014](#) issue

What if we gave up division for Lent? I wish we could let go of those things that divide us. Last year was a signal moment as many commemorated the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. I spoke on several occasions about the still necessary hope for racial unity where there is instead a devastating divide and about how so many wish desperately that we could let that division go. I suggested that a package deal would be nice. We could take other divisions that trouble our social and political attempts at unity: regional, gender, sexual orientation, economic, religious, and ideological. Then we'd harvest them into one magnificent, writhing bundle and just let them all go. What a season of Lent it would be!

But we don't do this. Perhaps we lack the will. Perhaps we lack direction. We need guideposts and leaders to show us the way. The author of the fourth Gospel understands. In his account of Jesus' ministry he takes care to include an incident that models the bravest of efforts at letting go of a human division that has created deep social barriers.

Jesus is on a journey from Judea to Galilee. Because he has to walk through the ethnic minefield that is Samaria, he might as well be on a trip from the past (the world as it is) into the future (the world as God intends). Jesus has to make this trip. The necessity is not geographical, as Warren Carter points out; it's theological. "[The necessity] reveals God's inclusive love for all." It reveals God's attempt to lead us away from our drive to divide.

The first-century ethnic hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews is widely acknowledged. Ethnic ancestry links the Samaritans and the Jews in the "promised land" settled by the Hebrew tribes. But after the Assyrian conquest in 721 BC, the tribes that had settled in the northern portion of Canaan were deported and

dispersed. By the first century AD these Samaritan tribes worshiped God on Mount Gerizim instead of Jerusalem, the preferred Jewish site. The division became deeper than a difference in the place of worship; it was a difference based in blood and identity. The peoples were religious about this ethnic divide and faithful to the hate that generated from it.

Jesus walked head-on into this hate when he intentionally wandered into the Samaritan city of Sychar and took a seat by a Samaritan well. This thirsty man who was the source of living water provided the model and the *modus operandi* for letting go of division. He sat waiting by a well without the necessary container for drawing water because he was waiting for something other than water. He was waiting for a Samaritan.

And a Samaritan showed up. Unsurprisingly, since drawing the water was primarily a woman's job, the Samaritan was a woman. Jesus had inserted himself into a situation where, in order to fulfill God's intent, he had to let go of the rule that said that a man of stature did not converse publicly with a woman and that a Jew did not interact with a Samaritan. He had the will to let go of that rule; he also had the way to do so. He chose a circumstance of division, then instigated community.

The Samaritan woman knew the power of ethnic division and wondered why Jesus wasn't adhering to the principle that had maintained this distance for so long. "Why does a Jew ask a Samaritan for a drink of water?"

Jesus could have said that he had no container with which to draw water. He could have said that he was thirsty. Instead, he said, "If you knew the gift of God that is me, you would have asked me for a drink, and I would have given you living water."

Jesus wanted to make a point. He asked his question to provoke the response that he knew would come. A Jew does not ask a Samaritan for water. A Samaritan, in any case, would not feel obliged to provide it. According to Jesus' odd response, Jesus is God's response to this circumstance of division. In him God provides a reservoir of living water that is as available to Samaritans as it is to Jews. Throughout the gospel, the offer of Jesus' person, power, and life was available to every Jewish person he met; now Jesus was saying that Samaritans too could ask for and receive this gift and that God did not respect the divide that the Samaritans and the Jews so religiously maintained. Here Jesus announces that worship of God is not tied to geographical divisions but crosses boundaries. True worshipers of God

commemorate God not in contested spaces segregated for some and against others, but in the location of spirit and truth.

Jesus has shown the way that cuts across the boundaries that humans devise—a way whereby life in real community can exist. In John 4 he precipitated community by acting against division, and for a brief moment he succeeded. While Jesus remained at the well the woman ran into the Samaritan city and proclaimed Jesus to her people. The Samaritans came to see Jesus and his Jewish disciples, and they believed and stayed with them. For two days Jews and Samaritans prayed and worshiped together as an undivided people. Where there had been division there was now community. If John had recorded Jesus' activity in the way the synoptic authors recorded Jesus' parables, he might well have ended with "Go and do likewise."