

Divisiveness, then and now

By [Brian K. Blount](#)

March 17, 2014

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Blount's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Several months ago, I was invited by a journal to reflect on the meaning of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech 50 years later. Two months after that article was published, I was asked to give a brief talk on the civil rights movement and how it impacted me as its events unfolded.

In both cases, I was asked to discuss the divisiveness that was addressed in the civil rights movement—and I could not help but reflect upon the divisiveness that bedevils much of American social and political life today. The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman presents a prime opportunity to continue that reflection through a biblical lens.

Here is an excerpt from my *Century* lectionary column on this passage:

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.

Subscribers can [read it all](#).