

How to Witness (4): Cross-Cultural Barriers

Sermon February 19, 2023

Scriptures: Romans 15:1-20

Golden Verse: “A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Give me a drink.’” (John 4:7)

Dear Beloved, today the Holy Spirit wants to target in us one of our biggest problems: CULTURAL BARRIERS. Jesus ignored the cultural prejudices and deliberately engaged this marginalized Samaritan woman in spiritual conversation. Jesus was not afraid of being “contaminated” by drinking out of a Samaritan woman’s cup. Nor was He afraid of talking privately with a woman about spiritual matters, although the Jewish rabbis viewed Samaritan women as ceremonially unclean.

I hope that none of us harbour any racial prejudice that would keep us from talking to those of other races about Christ. If this would be our problem, today we have to learn to overcome our prejudices.

Once, a minister in his sermon was asking these questions from his congregation:

- Would you talk kindly in public with a transvestite about his need for Christ?
- Would you avoid an obnoxious person at work or school rather than trying to build a bridge that could lead to sharing the gospel?
- Would you invite out a gay or lesbian couple, to show them hospitality and Christ's love?
- Would you invite out a social outcast, as this Samaritan woman probably was?
- Are you taking it seriously, that they all need Christ?
- Do you understand that to hear about Christ they need you, a Christian who is willing to risk public scorn to talk to him?

In Jesus’ time, the Samaritans are strangers and outsiders. Although they share faith in the same God and share the same Torah or first five books of the Bible, the Samaritans are seen as having a different religion mixed with lots of paganism.

As you remember, Jews around Samaria intermarried with newcomers from Mesopotamia and Syria, and mixed their beliefs with pagan religions and beliefs. Because of this, Samaritans were rejected and hated so much that, if orthodox Jews wanted to travel from Judea to Galilee, they would rather took a much longer roadway because they did not want to step on the land of Samaritans. For many hundreds of years, there was such dislike and hostility between Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus decides to go through Samaria because He tries to break down those barriers. He is sitting alone at the well of Jacob. The disciples are already doing something unusual: they have gone into a Samaritan city to buy food, yet any food they might buy from Samaritans is going to be unclean according to Jewish ritual standards.

While the disciples are in Sychar, Christ sits down by Jacob's Well, and He begins talking with a Samaritan woman who comes to this well for water. The conversation that follows becomes a model for how we respond to the stranger in our midst, whether they are foreigners, or people of a different religion, or people who share a different culture, attitude, or values.

Christ presents the classical Jewish perception of what Samaritans believe and how they worship. The Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Bible as holy scripture. For their part, Jews of the day pilloried this Samaritan refusal to accept more than the first five books of the Bible by claiming the Samaritans worshipped not the one God revealed in the five books but five pagan gods. In other circumstances, a Jewish man would have refused to talk to a Samaritan woman or to accept a drink from her hands. Any self-respecting Samaritan woman would have felt she had been slighted by these comments and she would walk away immediately. Instead, the two continue in their dialogue: Christ and this woman talk openly and humorously with one another and listen to one another.

Jesus gets to know the woman, and she gets to know Jesus. Their dialogue involves both speaking and listening. Obviously, all dialogue involves both speaking and listening. We are speaking with the expectation that we will be heard, and listening honestly to what the other person is saying rather than listening to what our **prejudices** tell us they ought to say.

When the disciples arrive back, they are filled with a number of questions. But they are so shocked by what they see happening before them that they remain silent. Their silence reflects their inability to reach out to the stranger. It is shocking that the disciples spoke to Samaritans when they were dealing with them, buying their food, but they were silently shocked when they saw that Jesus was talking to a Samaritan woman. They could not cover their prejudices: the woman gives and receives the water as she and Jesus talk, but they fail to return the kindness and they fail to take part in the conversation about faith with this woman. For this, no one in the city was brought to Jesus by the disciples, but many Samaritans listen to what the woman says.

The conversation between Christ and the Samaritan woman is a model for all our encounters with people we see as different or as strangers, or who are marginalized, or who are oppressed.

I share with you some very interesting information. In the Old Testament, in Leviticus 19:18, we read the great commandment: *“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”* The Old Testament commands us only once to love our neighbour, but in 37 places it commands us to love the stranger. It would be easier for us to love our neighbour, because our neighbour might be like we are. Now, we have to start to love strangers because they are like God, who created them.

We are in February when we remember black people’s history. Here at Calvin Family, we are so pleased to be blessed with our sisters and brothers, from around the world, who are bringing a special light into our community and into our lives as they share with us their hearts and their cultures. I raise up my heart to the Lord, giving special thanks to those brothers and sisters who are sharing with us their Korean culture, African Culture, Caribbean culture, or Middle Eastern culture. We are so blessed to be part of such a diverse family here at Calvin. And when I give thanks to all Calvin members one by one, I feel so ashamed of how people were treated here in North America whose colour was not white, who were not European descendants, who were born in Africa or the Caribbean or another part of the world. It is such a shame how God’s people were treated even in the last few decades just because their skin colour was not white.

We all have to ask a few questions of ourselves in the holy presence of the God: Am I like the disciples, too hesitant to go over and engage in conversation with the stranger who is at the same well, in the same shop, in the same post office or gas station, or waiting in line in a grocery store? If I am going to enter into conversation with a stranger, am I open to listening to them, to talking openly and honestly with them about where they come from and what they believe? When the conversation is over, will they remain strangers? How open am I to new friendships?

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews advises us: *“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it”* Hebrews 13:1-12. Amen