

Outside the Lines

John 4:5-42

Have you ever heard of *songlines*? They are the musical rhythms and melodies that identify home territory for aboriginal tribes of Australia. By following a *songline*, those who have lost their identity, where they have come from, are able to trace a path back to their beginnings, their place of conception. They can essentially find themselves. The lines of our lives are important. They give it shape. They can tell us where to go and especially where not to go. Families, school, and religion usually teach us to stay inside the lines when we color our lives. They even tell us how to draw the lines! Ironically, the Jesus we meet in the gospels teaches us to be willing to *color outside the lines*.

The story of Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well is full of examples of Jesus transgressing accepted norms, social decorum, religious restriction, and even proper behavior to color outside the lines. The result is that some others in the story also seemed to forget their place and begin to color outside the lines. As we review this story, count the times Jesus goes where he is not supposed to go, the times when he colors outside the lines.

The story begins as Jesus "came to a Samaritan city called Sychar." That's the first transgression of the lines. He is in Samaria! Why did Jesus go through Samaria when self-respecting Judeans and Galileans avoided Samaria at all cost? Samaria lay directly between Galilee and Judea, but the usual route was to go around. It was a long story of age old animosity that caused Jews literally to go out of their way to avoid Samaritans. But Jesus went through Samaria and, around the noon hour, he stopped to rest.

Jesus sat alone by the well. He probably wanted it that way. It is easy to poke fun at his disciples, but it's likely he needed a break from them once in a while. They had gone into the nearby town to buy food. Tired and thirsty, Jesus rested by the well of Jacob. You can imagine he was hoping someone would come along to give him a drink. Maybe he was hoping that an ostracized Samaritan woman would come. I wonder if Jesus was actually seeking this encounter or if he was just improvising. At any rate, he was there and he was awake.

A "Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her;" that's the second transgression of the lines. Jesus spoke to a woman. He initiated conversation with a woman to whom he was not married. To make matters worse, she was a Samaritan woman – one who was obviously ostracized by her village. No respectable woman came to draw water at the noon hour, in the heat of the day.

Jesus said, "Give me a drink." This was the third crossing of the lines. His request for a drink meant he intended to use her bucket. The woman was so amazed, she actually spoke to Jesus -- a little line transgressing of her own! "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" After all, "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans." In other words, Jews don't share the same utensil. This was not a matter of

hygiene, but of ritual religious purity. Violation made one unclean and, therefore, unable to go into the Temple without making an offering of ritual purification.

At this point, Jesus actually starts outside the lines he has already crossed. “Are you interested in some living water?” “Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.” With his offer of living water, Jesus is offering to hear her desires, her problems, her pain, and questions – seeking to take the conversation to a deeper level. “Yes, some living water sounds good. I would like a taste.” Some alternative to coming at noon to the well would be very nice. The only thing worse would be to come when the other women were there and her shame is reinforced.

“Go, call your husband and come back.” This is the fourth transgression of the lines. Jesus challenges her to reveal more of her story. He invites her into more relationship. I don’t know how Jesus knew this information about the woman. Jesus as he is depicted in the gospels often seems to have unexplained knowledge. In this story, his knowledge of the woman’s marital history and status functions to get her attention. And it does! She responds energetically because now she has a category in which to put Jesus. This is her chance to get back inside some lines. This is her opportunity to divert him by talking theology!

Jesus is not diverted. Instead, he pushes out farther. The subject of the conflict between Jews and Samaritans was a comfortably familiar one. But Jesus would not play that game. Neither the Jews nor the Samaritans are correct in this argument. Both sides are wrong. Besides, the time for waiting is over. “I am here now.”

Just about that time, part two of this story begins. The disciples come back from their grocery shopping and are extremely uncomfortable to see Jesus coloring away outside lines. Nobody says anything, but the non-verbal communication is pretty tense. All of a sudden, a new line gets crossed and someone besides Jesus is doing the coloring. Inspired by the disciples’ return, the woman leaves and goes into the village. She reconnects with those very people who have ostracized her. “Come and see what I have seen. Could this be the Messiah?”

Then, almost before you know it, another line is crossed. The people of the village actually listen to this woman. They listened and believed her, and they came to see Jesus. In rapid succession, the Samaritans invited Jesus (and probably the disciples, too) to stay a while. A line is crossed. Then, Jesus (and probably the disciples, too) stayed with the Samaritans two days. I think they spent that time coloring outside those lines.

Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well is a model for our own life journey reminding us of our need to cross barriers, transgress some lines, and color. This is not really an option in following Jesus. It is required. Actually, it is unavoidable. Following Jesus takes you into the *Samaritans* of your life. The choice to stay and color there can be the fun part.

I spent this past week in Florida. Now it was not much of a border crossing spending time in Florida in February. It was a sacrifice to put up with those 80 degree temperatures and all that sunshine! The place we stayed is called the Dunklin Memorial Center, though some call it the City of Refuge. It is a Christian substance abuse rehabilitation center. The center was founded and developed by friends of Jim and Eunice Pierce. Each year, they join with a group of colleagues with whom they have done renewal ministries over the years for a reunion and a week of prayer at that center.

This center is exactly in the middle of nowhere near Lake Okeechobee in south east Florida. Fifty years ago, the area was swamp. It is now like a small city on 300 acres with its own industries that help provide some of the \$11,000 it takes to run the center each day. It is truly a remarkable facility that has helped turn around the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands, of men. There is now a women's facility just down the road. This is a place begun and sustained by crossing lines. They have colored a powerful legacy through a ministry that continues to touch and change lives.

Though I enjoyed this experience, the language of faith used at Dunklin Memorial was, to a great extent, not mine. God was always busy setting the smallest details of everyday events in place to an extent that seemed to place God as the micromanager of life and almost a social secretary for people. I felt somewhat uncomfortable.

The discomfort I felt at first with that particular way of describing God's interaction with people's lives stemmed from a feeling that I had left that approach behind years ago and also from a sense that it did not seem genuine. At the same time, they seemed so sure God was working in the way they envisioned. The reality of their faith at work through that center and the lives touched and used by God through productive ministry was undeniable.

I came to realize that perhaps I felt a little uncomfortable by the thought that perhaps my own faith was not as strong as the faith shared by many of the people there. The setting was definitely outside my zone of comfort -- very agricultural and industrial. Even the faith language of most of those gathered for the reunion was much more that of the old Southern Baptist Convention than of the Emergent Church or particularly Crossroads Church. There, in that place and well outside the normal lines of my life, I rediscovered and reaffirmed the breadth of the road we travel together. I found that the Spirit, who touches my life in the depths of my own being, is also very present and very active in southeastern Florida. Many men and women, with real needs and problems, are finding the love of Christ in a clear and powerful way in that place and through that approach to faith.

It was a strange environment for me and I found myself coloring away outside those lines. I was feeling so blessed on Thursday afternoon, my final afternoon there, just walking around the center enjoying the sunshine. Suddenly, a voice called, "What time is it?" That's when John came over and wanted to talk. He told me his story. I listened and the experienced blessed me deeply. We prayed together and then I walked away

pondering the wonder of the Spirit and the unity of all creation. I found myself giving thanks to have been there with my eyes and ears open.

I am glad to be back home and within some familiar lines for me. God's presence and activity is just as strong in this place as in that place. We are not competing with one another for God's favor, but we journey side by side along a very wide pathway of faith. I am so aware now how the lines of our lives give shape to our journeys. That image reemerges of the songlines that give guidance and direction, that tell us who we are by telling us where we come from.

The lines that shape us are a blessing except when they control our future and limit the choices of what we will do. It is problem when those lines separate us from others. I felt that separation early on in my week, but gradually the barriers were crossed. I don't know if Jesus felt the separation at first, but I would be surprised if he did. I am convinced that Jesus' invitation to follow him is a call to color outside the lines. It is a call to radical inclusiveness and an affirmation of the oneness of all creation in God – the Samaritans, the Jews, the Southern Baptists, and those of us who worship at Crossroads.

I will leave you with a question, the question that was on my mind most of last week: "How do you encounter God on the journey that is your life? The answer I came up with is that I find and am found by God in my life mostly by stepping over conventional wisdom, by moving into what challenges me, and by occasionally doing something that just makes no sense, yet seems the right thing to do.

I invite you to step outside and color outside the lines of your life. Ask questions without knowing the answers. Hold open that unconventional space for that is where you commune with the Spirit. Remind yourself that what Jesus valued more than just about anything was the connection. He did not avoid people. Every person was worth challenging, critiquing, and taking the risk to get to know.

"We need to be delivered from all that binds and keeps the real self from breaking into music and becoming joy to the world!" (Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)
What is really important for your life? What will make you more fully the person you can be? Chances are good that the answers you seek will not be found inside the lines!