

**Airplane Mode: Silencing the Noise to Amplify God
The Noise of the Barriers (John 4:5-42; Lent 3A)**

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-noise-of-barriers/

An unlikely friendship began in 2016 when Wanda Dench texted her grandson about Thanksgiving dinner at her house. But instead of her grandson, who had forgotten to tell his grandma he got a new phone number, Wanda mistakenly texted 17-year-old Jamal Hinton.¹

In an interview after their story went viral, Jamal told the reporter what happened next. "I got a text that said, 'Thanksgiving at my house,' and it was from a grandma, but I was like, 'when did my grandma learn to text?' So, I asked her for a picture, and it was definitely not my grandma."

He sent his photo to her, and it was definitely not her grandson. But then he texted, "can I still get a plate tho?" to which Wanda replied, "Of course, you can. That's what grandmas do ... feed everyone."

And so, Thanksgiving Grandma was born. For seven years, they've gathered for Thanksgiving, even after Wanda's husband of 42 years died in April 2020 from COVID. Thousands have followed their journey and wait for the Thanksgiving photo update each year.

But their friendship isn't limited to just Thanksgiving. The families gather at other times throughout the year. Jamal and his girlfriend were there for Wanda when her husband, Lonnie, was sick, and after he passed, dropping off care packages and food for Wanda and the family. Jamal went with Wanda when she got her first tattoo. They're now business partners in a new venture, and Netflix is planning a movie.

The pair appeared on the Today Show this past November, with Dench saying that Hinton "literally changed my life and my point of view on young generations about being open to friendships when you think you have nothing in common with somebody. But when you just sit and talk to them? Oh my gosh ... He's in my heart for life. Family is more than blood."

Two unlikely friends from different generations and cultures made room for each other, first, at a table. And then, in their lives.

I'm not telling you this morning to text a random number and invite them to your Easter or Thanksgiving meal. But perhaps sharing a meal or even a drink of water is a good first step in

reducing the noise of barriers that keep us from hearing God at work in our lives and the lives of others.

In our world, there's a lot of noise encouraging us to build walls and barriers between us. Organizations and people play to our fear of the "other," intentionally and shrewdly labeling those with different cultures, beliefs, opinions, and experiences as problems rather than people. The division begins and widens with distortions and distance until the noise of our differences is all we hear.

Such was the division between the Jews and the Samaritans during the days of Jesus. In our text today, Jesus, a Jewish man, travels north from Judea to Galilee. The problem is the region of Samaria lies between them. Jews and Samaritans were enemies because of deep-rooted intolerance nurtured over many years and generations. Samaritans were widely considered mixed race (half Gentile, half Jew) and, thus, unclean. Both the Jews and the Samaritans were hostile toward each other's cultural and religious practices and sites of worship. Good Jews avoided Samaria, opting to go the rather long way east of the Jordan River to avoid going through Samaria. But not Jesus. In v 4, it says, 'Jesus **had** to go through Samaria.' The Greek word for 'had' is used in other places in the Gospel of John for Jesus's mission from God.ⁱⁱ Meaning it was not an accident nor a casual choice of Jesus to go through Samaria. It was a divine appointment.

On the way through, Jesus stops at a well while the disciples go into town for food. While there, a woman of Samaria comes to draw water, and Jesus asks for a drink.

Their conversation is the longest one-on-one theological conversation recorded in the Bible between Jesus and another person, and it was with a woman. Strict rabbis or Jewish teachers did not speak to women publicly, even their wives and kin. Not only was she a woman but also a woman of Samaria, which would have been unheard of. Jesus defies societal norms and purity laws of the day by talking to her. Taking a drink from something she had touched would have broken the purity codes and made Jesus unclean by Jewish standards.

She knew this all of this was unusual asking, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" The disciples knew this was not the norm, too, astonished to see Jesus talking to a woman when they returned. Yet, the text says they didn't question him because they probably had learned something abiding closely with Jesus. Even though it didn't always make sense to them, Jesus was trustworthy. Even though we are distracted by the noise of barriers, Jesus is in tune with the Father. A few verses later in chapter 5, verse 30, Jesus will say, "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me."

In our text today, Jesus crosses every barrier – geographic, ethnic, and gender. But it wasn't just the Samaritan woman Jesus had in mind when he revealed who he was to her and what he offered – this living water that satisfies like nothing else. Jesus loved her deeply and wanted her to experience the abundant life he was offering. AND Jesus also deeply loved the Samaritans and wanted this for them as well, and this woman at becomes the door to the Samaritans. After her encounter with Jesus, she drops everything and returns to her community to tell the story – still full of questions and doubts herself, yet hopeful. Her hope, not her certainty, was enough to move the Samaritans out to the well to meet Jesus, some believing in him and inviting him to stay with them for two days. As a result of this woman's story and their time with Jesus, the community believed for themselves. "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

The woman and the Samaritans weren't the only ones Jesus invited to cross barriers. I would love to have been a fly on the wall when Jesus told the Disciples they would stay awhile with people they hated. I'm sorry, Jesus, what? Don't you know who these people are – what they believe, what they've said, whom they come from? We'll be considered unclean. It was bad enough that we didn't just go around Samaria as respectable Jews do, but now you're asking us to hang out with them for a few days?

The Scripture does not tell us if they asked questions or put up a fight. Perhaps, again, they didn't question Jesus because they had learned something abiding so closely with him. Even though it didn't always make sense, Jesus was trustworthy. Even though we are distracted by the noise of barriers, Jesus is in tune with the Father. Even though we build barriers, Jesus crosses every barrier in love. The story of the Samaritan woman was not just about one woman's life-changing encounter with Christ. It was about the life-changing encounter with Christ for two groups of people – the Samaritans and the Jews. Not even centuries-old ethnic and racial hostility, nor gender or cultural norms, were beyond the healing work of Jesus. It still isn't. Regarding the story of Jesus in Samaria, author Marshall Seagal wrote, "Racial hostility itself bowed before King Jesus. Hostility between us, between black and white and every other boundary and barrier, dies the same way: by bowing to Jesus."

When the story of Jesus and the woman of Samaria was told in those early, formative years of the Church, the followers of Jesus were dealing with lots of noise about how to relate to others, to Gentiles and Samaritans. The fact that Jesus regarded a Samaritan – and a Samaritan woman at that – to be worthy of conversation and trusted with the announcement of who Jesus was – would have urged them to think twice about whom they excluded or treated as second-class people. As author Jennifer Garcia Bashaw wrote, "John affirming a religious and social outsider as the first Christian evangelist is significant. This episode confirms the nature of the Jesus movement for its followers – it was a movement that privileged outsiders over insiders, one

that had begun with and would always be characterized by radical inclusion and boundary-breaking community.”

At the beginning of the Book of Acts in the New Testament, we find the final recorded words of the Risen Christ to his disciples. After his death and resurrection, Jesus presented himself alive to them in many different settings over forty days. In face-to-face meetings, as they met and ate together, Jesus talked to them about the kingdom of God, telling them to remain in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes on them. And then he said, in v. 8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." These were the last recorded words of the Risen Christ before he ascended to Heaven.

Who can break down barriers we believe are unbreakable? Even the barrier of death itself? The Risen Christ can. And if we follow him and abide with him, if we silence the noise and amplify God, he'll lead us to cross these barriers, too.

The story of the woman from Samaria is one of my favorites. This image hangs in my office as a reminder of several things I don't want to forget.

It reminds me of the danger of assumptions. There are so many assumptions in this story, but the one I think of often is the assumptions we make about the woman. There is a prevailing narrative that this nameless woman was a sinful woman because she had five husbands. She was sinful, as we all are, but there is nothing in the text to support the assumption she was a woman who was adulterous or “got around” as is often how she is characterized. She may have had five husbands for many reasons. She may have been widowed, which was quite common at that time. Or she may have been divorced but never by her initiative in her culture. In a patriarchal or male-controlled society, she would have zero power. A man had grounds to divorce her if she could not have children. A man had grounds to divorce her for nearly any reason he could justify. And if she had a scandalous reputation, would the townspeople have listened to her and followed her out to the well to meet Jesus? Would they have believed in Jesus because of her testimony if she was known as a woman who couldn't be trusted? Perhaps we've judged her harshly all these years because of what we bring to the text rather than what the text brings to us.

When I look at this picture in my office, it reminds me to silence the noise of assumptions about her and others and listen instead to what Jesus says about loving and including all in the kingdom of heaven. When I look at this picture, it reminds me of what has been handed to us, entrusted to us. After the woman left to tell others about him, Jesus tells the disciples to look around them at the land of Samaria and silence the noise of all the assumptions and barriers they've ever known and believed about these people. The fields are ripe for harvesting! The time is now to share the good news because the Samaritans were also welcomed to the party.

And now Jesus was inviting his followers and the Samaritans to share meals and conversations with those who, hours earlier, had been enemies. During those two days, Jesus and his disciples would have engaged with the Samaritans on an intimate level—eating, talking, living together—despite massive cultural divides. I imagine a change of heart for both groups didn't happen overnight, but a drink of water, a shared meal, and a whole lot of Jesus was a good start.

There are places and people we want to avoid, to go around. There are people we make assumptions about because of what we bring to their stories rather than what is their story. There's a lot of noise in and around us about who is included and excluded, who is worthy and unworthy. The division widens with distortions and distance until the noise of our differences is all we hear.

Acclaimed theologian, author, and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, once said that the expression of hate in our world often begins with "contact without fellowship." Where there are contacts or exchanges with others devoid of genuine fellowship, such contacts stand in immediate candidacy for hatred.

Why did we partner with other faith traditions in our city to welcome refugees from Afghanistan as neighbors and friends? Because Jesus said follow me. I have things to teach you about these I love. Why has our church ordained women to gospel ministry for decades? Because Jesus said follow me. I have things to teach you about whom I call.

My hope for FBC JC is that we will continue to be a congregation that demolishes barriers because we follow Jesus. Where Jesus goes, we go. Jesus says we're not going around; we're going through, for we seek to do not our will but the will of him who sends us.

Like I said earlier, you don't need to send a text to a random number. It might make for a cool story, but it also a crazy one. Perhaps, we can begin by inviting someone to coffee, or lunch, or a walk to begin a contact with fellowship. Or maybe the first step you can take, which is better than no step, is to read a book with humility and curiosity by someone whose journey appears quite different than your own. Maybe there are some assumptions that need to be challenged before some barriers can be crossed. Jesus entered the Samaritan woman's world, met her where she was, and began a conversation based on love and respect. He was invited in and brought his disciples with him. Where Jesus goes, we go.

Maybe today you simply need to meet Jesus at the well yourself. To ask your questions, recognize your thirst for something that truly fulfills you, and hear Jesus say to you, "I am he. I am the Messiah." We come to the well of living water over and over again and find him never lacking. He knows us, all of us, and he loves us. Follow him, abide in him, and you, too, will proclaim, along with our Samaritan friends, that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

No matter where we find ourselves in today's story, may we ask Jesus to silence the noise of barriers and divisions, so we might go where Jesus goes and love as Jesus loves for the glory of God and the good of the world.

ⁱ <https://people.com/human-interest/thanksgiving-grandma-jamal-hinton-wanda-dench-thanksgiving-photos/>

ⁱⁱ Bashaw, Jennifer Garcia. *Scapegoats: The Gospel through the Eyes of Victims*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 222.