

The transformative potential of everyday encounters

A reflection on John 4:1-42

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Introduction

John 4:1-42 holds valuable insights for us as we reflect on how to include and value those around us. This is particularly important in today's increasingly polarized climate, where political, racial and ethnic tensions are high. Although many of us know in theory that we should love our neighbours, sometimes those closest to us are the ones we find hardest to love. Sometimes they're also the ones we find hardest to see.

[Read the Bible passage together](#) and [watch this animated video](#):



Crossing boundaries in common spaces

Jesus and the Samaritan woman encountered one another by a well – a common space found in most communities at the time, often in a central location. This particular well was also on Mount Gerzim, the site at the centre of one of the main sources of religious tension between the Jews and the Samaritans. For the Samaritans, this was a holy space.

Women would typically have gone out to draw water in the cool of the evening or early in the morning, so it's telling that this woman chose to do so at noon – the hottest part of the day – when she knew that it was unlikely that anyone else would be there. Yet Jesus – the 'stranger' in this space – intentionally crossed social, cultural, religious and geographical boundaries to engage with her.



Historical context

Jews and Samaritans didn't interact with one another. In Jesus' time, this would have been common knowledge. The hostility between them had a long history stretching back to the Assyrian conquest of Israel in 722 BC, when thousands of Jews from Samaria – the then capital of the northern kingdom of Israel – were taken into captivity and scattered throughout the Assyrian empire. The Samaritans were the descendants of those left behind, who had intermarried with the Assyrians and adopted some of their customs (2 Kings 17:24-41). They actively opposed the return of a remnant of the exiles to Jerusalem in 530 BC, and from this point on the enmity between Jews and Samaritans intensified. Although both worshiped God, they disagreed over where to worship (John 4:20). So great was their animosity that the Jews even referred to the Samaritans as 'dogs' or 'half-breeds', and considered anything they touched impure. Rather than travel through Samaria, the Jews preferred to take the longer route to get from the North to the South.

Question 1:

Spend some time inhabiting the story. Imagine yourself in the positions of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, the disciples and the Samaritans from the town. In what ways do you identify with each of the characters?

Question 2:

What would you identify as the main 'common spaces' in your life where you come across those that are different to you?

Question 3:

Can you identify any specific boundaries (social, cultural, religious or geographical) that exist between you and others within these spaces?

Question 4:

Who's missing or excluded from the common spaces in your community, and why might that be?

Question 5:

Do you see opportunities for connection across boundaries in these spaces? If not, why not? If so, in what ways could you be more intentional about this?



Engaging courageously

Jesus and the Samaritan woman interacted with each other just as they were. This interaction, in that context, was a kind of willing acceptance. Their encounter was courageous: they were both willing to break the established 'rules of engagement' within their communities – by talking with one another in the first place, but also by genuinely listening to each other, with a willingness to engage honestly and openly. They asked questions, and acknowledged their differences without allowing them to turn into walls.

Question 6:

What are the 'rules of engagement' within your community? What practical steps can you take to break the societal norms that prevent you from having encounters such as this?

Question 7:

What was it about the way that Jesus interacted with the woman that might have helped events to unfold as they did? How did Jesus show hospitality to the woman?

Question 8:

What stands out to you about the woman's interaction with Jesus that might have helped deepen their encounter? How did she show hospitality towards Jesus?

Question 9:

What did Jesus / the woman / the community gain from their interaction? In what ways can we, our faith communities and our societies gain from 'uncommon' interactions such as this?



Becoming a bridge

It's an inspiring example of how interaction between individuals can lead to community-wide change. In a short space of time the community – most likely led by the men in the village – acted against the cultural norm of not going to the well at noon, and they urged Jesus, a Jew, to accept their hospitality. Because of the way in which Jesus interacted with the woman, she became a bridge to her community – she might even have been the first evangelist!

Question 10:

Can you think of other examples of encounters between individuals that have had a ripple effect such as this?

Question 11:

How might you be able to act as a bridge in your community?



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