

Mortal Combat: Jesus vs. Culture

John 4:4-26 (NIV)

⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. ⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" ¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." ¹⁶ He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." ¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." ¹⁹ "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." ²⁵ The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he."

Have you noticed the trend that people gravitate toward and surround themselves with other people who think like them, hold similar values, similar beliefs? People will choose where to live and work based on the political and religious climate. And this is not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself. It can be good and beneficial and right to surround yourself with people who will reinforce your values and beliefs, especially when those values and beliefs are centered on God and his Word. This is what we do as a church, a group of people united by Christ to encourage each other to stay close to God and live according to his Word.

It becomes a bad thing, though, when we segregate ourselves from others who don't share our beliefs and values, when we just don't want to deal with opposing opinions. I'm talking more about completely dumping the whole interacting with the world as opposed to times of seeking times of respite and restoration. Yes, rest and solitude are good and necessary things. Even Jesus did them. But we take moments of rest in order to continue being what God has called us to be: his royal priests to shine his Light into this world, showing people the Son of Man lifted up on the cross to take away the sins of the world, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. It's this conflict between interacting with culture and resting from culture that leads us to our mortal combat today of Jesus vs. culture.

What is "culture"? At our Everyone Outreach workshop held back in January, we defined culture as the shared thought habits that frame the way people behave and work together. There are things that we as a group of people do that we think are the right way of doing things without necessarily thinking about why we do them. Our culture might be one of very good habits of behavior, but it might also get in the way of our mission and purpose to be God's light in this world.

Culture was getting in the way of shining God's light when it came to the relations between the Jews and the Samaritans. They have a long history, but the summation of it is that they got along like dogs and cats, oil and water, Capulets and Montagues from *Romeo and Juliet*. They were very prejudiced against each other based on their ethnicity as well as their beliefs about what was the Word of God. Their cultures divided each other, as John tells us in our reading today: For Jews do not associate with Samaritans. (verse 9)

You may not be involved in the culture war of Jews vs. Samaritans, but do you separate yourself from other cultures because of the culture? Who do you avoid based on principle? Are there people that you've been taught not to associate with? Do you see the person who is hostile to Christianity, who thinks that it's outdated, homophobic, and chauvinistic, and have already decided that I am not going there with this person? Do you see a friend or neighbor who adheres to a non-Christian faith and you put up a "No Trespass" sign on that relationship when it comes to talking about God and his Word? Do we avoid associating and talking with people because they are of a different religious culture than we are?

Crossing cultural lines is uncomfortable. You feel very vulnerable when you do because you don't have the safety net of having the same set of values and beliefs. They don't think like you, don't see the world as you see it. If you go out on a limb and share what you think and believe, you can be tested, challenged, rebuked, insulted, dismissed — all feeling like very personal attacks as your faith

in God makes you who you are. So, you and I, we often sidestep the cultural lines. We look at them from a distance and don't engage. We don't want the fight. It's too messy, too complicated, and we don't even know where to start.

But what about Jesus? Jesus was well aware that Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other. He grew up in that culture. Yet, here he is crossing the cultural divide as he asks a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. He did this because he had what she and the people in her culture needed.

Where does Jesus start in crossing the Jewish vs. Samaritan culture? He started with something universal: thirst. Everyone gets thirsty. Everyone needs water. This transcended both cultures. From that introduction point of a universal physical need, Jesus then pointed the woman to quenching another universal need – the need to be saved from her sins, the need for eternal life, the need for God to accomplish this for her. Jesus crossed the cultural divide to save this woman from her sinful life – something that became apparent both from the fact that she came alone to the well in a time when women would always go in groups and from Jesus' question about her family life.

Jesus crossed cultures for us as well. As Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman, "salvation is from the Jews." (verse 22) God came down from heaven and took on human flesh and blood to enter into our culture - a culture of weakness, tiredness, of thirst, of sin. It's a messy existence with messy people in a messy culture. God never had to experience any of these things. Yet, by becoming man, a Jewish man, he crossed into our human culture to fight all of these things for us in order to forever quench our spiritual thirst in a way nothing else could ever do.

Jesus is the living water that quenches our thirst because only he lived that perfect life that we need in order to be right with God. By the work of the Holy Spirit, we are born again, made new, so that not only are our sins washed away, but we are also covered with Jesus' perfection. This makes us right with God. This quenches our spiritual thirst when nothing else can. This is what Jesus gave to this Samaritan woman, that he gives to us. In the mortal combat against culture, Jesus wins because he is the universal Savior that transcends every culture to quench every single person's spiritual thirst.

Having our universal spiritual thirst quenched by the universal Savior, let's go back those cultural divides that we don't cross. Did you catch that crossing these cultural divides with our universal Savior is not optional? The very first verse in our reading today said: "Now [Jesus] had to go through Samaria." (verse 4) If you look on a map of where Jesus was coming from and where he was going, he didn't have to go through Samaria. He could have skirted it. He could have avoided crossing the border, avoided this cultural conflict. But he had to because he was going to cross the cultural divide with this Samaritan woman, to quench her spiritual thirst.

God did not put us here on this earth and give us this time so that we would stay in our comfortable cultural bubbles and only ever be with people who think and believe like us. God has given us a mission to satisfy a universal need in all cultures by offering his universally thirst-quenching spiritual water of himself and what he's done for us. So, what "No Trespass" signs on cultural divides do we need to take down like Jesus did to do this? To whom do we need to go in different cultures that so far I have avoided?

Once you figure that out, then we ask: "How do we cross those cultural divides?" Honestly, I don't know the exact how in every situation. Because I don't, I'm inviting us to have that conversation. You tell me: How do we approach crossing religious cultures? How do we create opportunities to offer people the universal thirst-quenching spiritual water of Jesus? Talk about this. Talk about this with me. Don't let this be a sermon that you just listen to. Challenge yourself to see what you personally can do to cross cultural divides that you haven't up to this point. What do people wrestle with? What sin nags their consciences? How do you find an opportunity or a venue to show them that they have Jesus' perfection right now so that you can quench their spiritual thirst?

And, yes, it's going to be uncomfortable crossing those cultural divides. Yes, there will be challenges, much like the challenges that Samaritan woman gave to Jesus. But do you know how his mortal combat of crossing the Jew vs. Samaritan culture turned out? The woman left her water jar there, went back into town, and brought everyone to come and listen to Jesus. He stayed there two days teaching them. John records: "And because of his words many more became believers." (verse 41) In Jesus vs. culture, Jesus wins!

Jesus crossed cultural divides to satisfy the universal thirst that all people of all cultures have. Jesus come even into our cultures with that same universal forever thirst-quenching spiritual water. What cultural divides will you cross with the universal thirst quencher of Jesus? As you do, remember that when it comes to Jesus vs. culture, Jesus wins! Amen.