The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is a story about crossing geographical boundaries. The set up for the story has Jesus crossing geographical boundaries. Just before this passage, John’s gospel tells us that Jesus “left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria.” For those of you who aren’t familiar with the region, Judea was the southern part of Israel, the area around Jerusalem. Galilee was the northern part of Israel, where the Sea of Galilee and the cities of Nazareth and Capernaum are located. Nazareth, of course, was Jesus’ childhood home, and Capernaum was the city he chose to be his home base as an adult. Samaria was the region between Judea and Galilee. So, Jesus was on a journey, traveling northward, back to his home in Galilee, and he had to go through Samaria to get there. The very context of the story gives us a clue that it’s about crossing boundaries.

As the story begins, we find Jesus sitting by Jacob’s well, resting from his journey. It’s around noontime, when the sun is high in the sky and the day is at its hottest. He’s thirsty, but he can’t get to the water without a water bucket or some other container to lower down into the deep, dark well. Just then, a Samaritan woman comes to the well to draw water, and Jesus asks her for a drink. In doing so, Jesus was crossing the conventional social boundaries of his day.

First off, she was a woman. When Jesus’ disciples returned from doing the grocery shopping in town, the passage tells us that they were astonished to find Jesus speaking with a woman. Jewish men did not go around having casual conversations with unknown women! And yet, here Jesus was doing exactly that, and in public, no less! What was he thinking?

What’s more, he was not just talking with any woman. He was talking with a Samaritan woman, which was even worse. As John points out, “Jews [did] not share things in common with Samaritans.” In Jesus’ day there was a long-standing enmity between Jews and Samaritans. They didn’t interact. They kept their distance. Samaritans were outcasts. They were descendants of mixed marriages in northern Israel. They were half-breeds, and as such they were hated and despised.

In addition, this particular Samaritan woman, we learn, was a woman with a past. She had a history of relationships with men, which had included five husbands, and now a man with whom she was living who was not her husband. She was probably treated as an outsider by her own community, given that she was drawing water in the middle of the day instead of in the cooler morning or evening hours, when others in the community would normally have come to the
well. But Jesus does not question her past or judge her for her current living situation. He simply accepts her for who she is – a human being, a beloved child of God.

The Samaritan woman had three strikes against her. She was a woman, which, in the first century, gave her a lower status than that of men. She was a Samaritan, a kindred people whom the Jews despised. And she was a social outcast, ostracized by her own people for her questionable past and suspect lifestyle.

But for Jesus, none of that mattered. You see, Jesus’ ministry was radically inclusive. He crossed all the boundaries that would normally have kept him apart from the Samaritan woman – gender boundaries between men and women, religious/ethnic boundaries between Jews and Samaritans, and social boundaries between the honored and the dishonored. Jesus crossed these boundaries in order to reach out to the Samaritan woman. In doing so, he transformed conventional expectations and challenged the status quo.

What happened next – after the Samaritan woman’s encounter with Jesus? Well, she left her water jar at the well and went back to the city to tell others in her community about Jesus. Many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus because of the woman’s testimony. Some followed her back out to the well to meet Jesus for themselves. And they invited him to stay with them in the city for a couple of days. After some time with Jesus, listening to him for themselves, many more came to believe that Jesus is "the Savior of the world."

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well should impress upon us the importance of reaching out to all people -- across lines of nation and class, religion and race, sexual orientation and gender identity – lines that so often divide us. That means moving outside of our comfort zones to interact with people who are different from ourselves. It means going out into the community, sitting by a watering hole, and having the courage to strike up a conversation with a total stranger. God only knows what might come out of such an encounter!

So many people today feel isolated and alone. Many of us don’t even know our next door neighbors! The irony is that technologically we’re more connected today than we ever have been, thanks to the internet, smart phones, and social media. But at the same time, most of us long for real human community, to be with other people in the flesh, face to face. One place we find that is church.

At its best, the church ought to offer a foretaste of God’s kingdom, of “the beloved community," in which no one is discriminated against and all people are honored. The church is called to practice the radically inclusive love of Jesus Christ. That means being an inclusive community, a loving community, a welcoming community, open to the whole people of God, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, abled and disabled, liberal and conservative, gay and straight, black, brown, yellow, and white.
When we cross borders, transcend boundaries, and break through walls that divide us from others, we find that we have far more in common with others than we have in conflict. We find the truth that Christ is our peace, that we are one humanity. We "are no longer strangers and aliens," but "citizens with the saints," "members of the household of God." Thanks be to God. Amen.