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## Viewpoint

# "Please, Don't Go There!" Missiological Considerations for Those Who Are Not Interested in Missions

"Now he had to go through Samaria" (John 4:4 NIV)

The disciples were walking the hot, dusty road back from that evil, heathen city. Well, it wasn't all *that* evil or heathen when they were hungry a few moments earlier. Opinions do tend to change with the circumstances. "O God, I'm so glad to get out of that place. It makes me uncomfortable!"

You must understand, Jews had a problem with Samaritans. They weren't pure-blooded Jews. They didn't come from the same background. They didn't worship quite the same. They just weren't similar in many ways at all! Jewish disdain was so intense toward the Samaritans that in order to travel from Judea to Galilee or vice versa, they would travel at 90-degree angles rather than take the direct route through Samaria.

And while they wouldn't say so in his presence, they already had a problem with Jesus on this particular day. "Why do we have to go through Samaria? You know we don't want to go through enemy territory any more than they want us to go through there. We really don't mind taking the long way home. But whatever you do—please, don't go there!"

The disciples were taking Jesus food that they bought in the nearby Samaritan village. "Let's just take him this food so we can get outta here." As they approach Jesus, they can't believe their eyes. Not only is he talking to a Samaritan, he's talking to a Samaritan *woman*. Jewish literature spoke against such improper behavior; so why is he doing this?

Homileticians so often focus on the dialogue between Jesus and the

woman. But the more I study this story, the more I like what is about to take place when the disciples arrive on the scene. They know nothing about the conversation. They are only to initially know that these upcoming events are about to turn their world upside down.

The conversation ends a little later, and the woman returns to her community. They had no reason to think they would ever see her again; but lo and behold, she's back—accompanied by a whole lot of other Samaritans. The disciples reasoned among themselves, "Perhaps he'll answer some questions and bless a few of them. Then we'll be on our way." Next thing they know, they're getting an all-expenses-paid, two-day stay in a lovely Samaritan village.

This is where their lesson continued, and where our instruction starts.

### Why Did They Have to Go There?

Reflecting many decades later upon that day, John writes that Jesus and the disciples *had* to go through Samaria. Why? I'm not so sure that this story was simply about Jesus and a Samaritan woman, or about a Samaritan woman and her past, or about what constitutes true worship, or about anything else either you or I have heard about the events recorded in John 4. The real focus of this chapter was the mindset of the Twelve. The real question for the disciples was, "How will you ever be able to go to—and minister to—Jerusalem, Judea, *and Samaria*, if you don't care about all of these?"

The disciples had to go through Samaria because they needed to be cured of their bigotry. *Bigotry* can be defined as "extreme intolerance of any creed, belief, or opinion that differs from one's own" (*Webster's Universal College Dictionary* 1997:76). I also suggest that bigotry is characterized by being intolerant of or indifferent toward anyone whom we perceive to be different from us. Bigotry is not the exclusive domain of one race or one class. Anyone can be guilty of bigotry. Bigotry is best recognized when someone participates in stereotyping.

Look at the history behind the story of our text. Mixed bloodlines from hundreds of years back created an inferior race of people. Or so the average Jew thought. Their worship styles were different than those of the Jews. Their entire worldview was separate and distinct, each from the other. Whose was preferable? Their own, of course! And what was most important? "Jesus is one of us. He relates better with our kind than with yours!"

I believe Jesus decided early that morning, while he was communing with his heavenly Father, that he and his disciples had to go through Samaria. They had to do it because his disciples needed to see the prejudices

that had taken residence deep within their hearts. Jesus knew that the only way his followers would learn to stop stereotyping—the only way that they could be cured of their deep-seated bigotry—was to spend time with those despised Samaritans. Spending time with them would explode those stereotypes. Spending time with them would help them to see that the things they had in common far outnumbered the things they did not have in common. Perhaps most of all, spending time with them would help his disciples to see that in so many ways those Samaritans actually had a better understanding of God than they themselves did.

There are many "Samaria" towns in the United States. What about in the Philippines? Kenya? Canada? Bangladesh? Germany? Australia? Is God calling us to go to villages we're not comfortable visiting. Does our discomfort say more about those villagers? Or about us?

I wonder how many of us need to leave our Jerusalem and spend some time in Samaria. I wonder how many of us need to stop trying to take the long way home, in an effort to avoid Samaria, and just go ahead and come face to face with those Samaritans. I believe that when we take the time to walk with them, to talk with them, to eat with them, that we will discover that they are just like we are.

The work of mission—of fulfilling the Gospel commission in areas that are not like our own—requires a different mindset. It requires the mind of Christ. He left his home in glory, took on a human body, lived in the squalor called earth, became one with us—so he could lift us up and give us a clearer view of God; so we could experience all that heaven has to offer to us. It doesn't mean that we accept the belief systems of others. But it does mean that we take the time to understand why others believe as they believe and see life as they see it.

I believe that Jesus had to go through Samaria because his disciples needed to see that he saw the best in everyone. When Jesus revealed to the Samaritan woman that he knew about her past, she sensed no spirit of condemnation. Had she sensed a critical spirit, do you think she would have so excitedly dropped that water jar, run back to the city, and invited a bunch of men she had known for some time to come and spend time with Jesus?

What a difference the Church of God, the Body of Christ, would make in communities worldwide if its members saw the best in everyone! What a difference we would make if we, like Jesus, focused on similarities and not differences; if we focused on people and not reputations or perceptions. Somewhere beneath those hardened rough exteriors that we allow to scare us away from coming close to others lies a heart that yearns for something better. I am convinced that when Bible writers refer to humans as the "apple of God's eye," what they are really saying is that, no matter

how defaced the image of God might be in each of us, we still have been made in his image, and there is something of that image that is still visible and evident in each of us. Our job as brothers and sisters in Christ is to look for that image of Divinity within all men, women, boys, and girls.

Last but not least, I believe that Jesus had to go through Samaria because his disciples needed to see that the Gospel is for everyone. Everyone is worthy to receive God's grace. And remember that worthiness is determined not by who we are but by what we need. And what we all need is the power of the Gospel!

Those Twelve needed to know that they couldn't afford to be afraid to get their hands dirty. They could only be apostles if they were willing to be with the people, to spend time with the people.

### Conclusion

You and I have to go through Samaria. Perhaps those who live there haven't washed their clothes in a while. Perhaps they curse like the proverbial sailor. Perhaps they have defiling habits. Jesus is our Model. He who sat on high came down low to spend time with us. And he saw that our spirituals garments were in need of washing, heard that our mouths were filled with cursing and other foulness, and noticed that our habits were so filthy that angels would have looked away had it not been for the divine command to keep an eye on us so Satan wouldn't destroy us!

I am convinced that there's a two-way blessing in going through Samaria. We think we are going there to bless them. The real blessing that God has is for us! It may be that God wishes to reveal himself more fully to us through those same Samaritans that we wish to avoid. Let our desire be, "Please, let's go there!"



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