

“The Four Marks” - Stephanie Sorge, 2/1/26

If you’ve been around Trinity for a little while, you’ve likely heard about the “Four Marks of the Church.” I won’t put Mark Facknitz on the hot seat to name all four; they are worship, nurture, mission, and fellowship. Sometimes, new members sheepishly confess that they’ve never heard of the four marks of the church, but that’s because they are unique to Trinity. When the church was founded 63 years ago, Acts 2:42-47 was a guiding passage. What did the early church do? They enjoyed meals together, worshipped together, studied together, and met the needs of their community. Today I want to talk about four different marks, and Facknitz and Dewey are not two of them! Trinity uses the word “mark” as an indicator, but there are other meanings, too.

Our story begins by marking boundaries. Jesus left Judea, went back to Galilee, and had to pass through Samaria on the way. Passing through Samaria wasn’t a geographical necessity, so it had to have been a divine one. In fact, Jews often went way out of their way to skirt Samaria, because crossing the social boundary between Jews and Samaritans was avoided whenever possible.

Like most boundaries, marks are often superficial, even if given weight as if having been set in stone. As the Samaritan woman points out, Jews and Samaritans had common ancestors - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - and yet, the enmity was real - a very us-versus-them mentality. But how different were they, really?

Humans have long marked each other in any number of ways. In the United States, race has been one of the primary markers, seen on every demographic checklist to this day. What has been defended as God-ordained separation is a human invention. Race is a social and political construct. That's not a subject for today, but there are many books and resources that make this clear.

The relationship between Jews and Samaritans has sometimes been compared to the modern-day relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, or Blacks and Whites in the era of Jim Crow laws. Suffice it to say, marking someone as a Samaritan in Jesus's day carried a load of unspoken assumptions and judgments. They weren't just different, they were inferior. If we don't understand that relationship, we can't grasp the significance of this story.

A second mark, related to the first, is signaling something out for special notice. The mark might function like a target on one's back, or it might just be a way of noting difference. This person is a Jew, that person a Samaritan. The Samaritan woman is frequently marked as that - the Samaritan woman. It doesn't help that she is unnamed, but she is repeatedly marked as a Samaritan in this story. Do we know of any other Samaritans? Well, there was that "good" one back in Luke's gospel...

Jesus interacted with all kinds of people, but they were rarely marked in the same way. A Samaritan was always marked. Lest we be inclined to say it's just a

descriptive marker, how did we arrive at the story of “the Good Samaritan?” Jesus didn’t say, “Now I’m going to tell a parable about a Good Samaritan.” Bearing the mark of Samaritan was enough to know that someone was not good, so this story eventually became known as the Good Samaritan, to indicate that this was about an outlier. A model minority. Unlike the rest of his kind.

This kind of marking indicates what is outside the norm. Outside of the dominant norm. The socially constructed dominant norm. These marks subtly, even insidiously, reinforce the dominance of the “unmarked” group. We’ve seen this in the attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion. DEI policies have focused on marked groups because of the inequity and injustice built into our systems.

Affirmative action is a prime example. Some argue that it has met a need, done its work, and is no longer necessary. At least that point of view gives lip service to the idea that there have been structural inequities in need of correction. Others claim it is reverse discrimination against non-marked groups. The attack on DEI that we’ve seen over the past year might have been ignited by this argument, but its fuel has been good old-fashioned racism, sexism, ableism.... well, you get the point. It’s not a desire to remove marks and level the playing field. It’s doubling down on the idea that anything marked - anything outside of the socially constructed dominant norm - is, in fact, inferior.

Geographic boundaries are marked. Social boundaries are marked. The woman at the well is marked as female, Samaritan, and unmarried. That leads us to mark #3 - she is marked by God. This is the longest dialogue between Jesus and another person, across all gospels. Jesus chooses to go through Samaria. He chooses to go by himself to the well. He chooses to engage this woman in conversation, and he chooses to reveal who he is to her. She is marked as a follower of Jesus and a witness to others. She is marked as the outsider who understands, in contrast to Nicodemus, the insider who doesn't quite get it. There may not be a baptism at the well, but just as in baptism, she is marked as God's own, forever.

One of the marks of John's gospel is Jesus's "I am" statements. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the true vine, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and the life..." His first "I am" statement is here, revealed to this marked woman. She mentions the Messiah, and Jesus responds, "I am." Not "I am he," as some translations write. Simply, "I am." It is an echo of the divine self-revelation to Moses. From the burning bush, God speaks, "I am who I am; I will be who I will be." Only to this Samaritan woman does Jesus make the same simple claim, "I am."

There's still the fourth mark to contend with. Mark can also mean to stain or damage. It's one of the layers of this story. The relationship between Jews and

Samaritans was marked - damaged - because of their theological disagreements and geographical differences. We have been marked by supremacy ideologies since the first Europeans began to explore and settle this part of the world. I remember the rhyme, "Columbus sailed the ocean blue in fourteen hundred and ninety-two." Just one year later, The Doctrine of Discovery was written, claiming that "any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be "discovered," claimed, and exploited by Christian rulers... [It] declared that "the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself."¹ I know this isn't what it means, but referring to this as a Papal bull fits.

Christian and Western European supremacy were established early, and as the colonies continued to grow, another supremacy was quickly codified: white supremacy. White supremacy upheld the institution of chattel slavery, which is sometimes called a stain on our nation, but white supremacy is still alive and well. In fact, white supremacy is a defining mark that continues to damage us all - individually and collectively.

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<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/doctrine-discovery-1493>

As we enter this shortest month of the year, the one in which Black History gets some nominal recognition, we must continue to unmask the ways white supremacy infects our lives. It is promoted and celebrated in the highest levels of government. White supremacy is ICE on the streets: armed, dangerous, and unaccountable. White supremacy builds and fills detention centers - concentration camps by a different name. White supremacy is the prison-industrial complex. White supremacy is denying entry to melanin-gifted, vetted refugees from the most dire of living situations, and welcoming White Afrikaners who claim oppression by the justice they have tried to thwart. White supremacy is marching for Good and Pretti and forgetting Keith Porter, Jr, Luis Gustavo Núñez Cáceres, Geraldo Lunas Campos, Víctor Manuel Díaz, Parady La, Luis Beltrán Yáñez-Cruz, Heber Sánchez Domínguez - those who have died at the hands of ICE since New Year's Eve. If you don't know their names or stories, that's not a personal moral failure - that's white supremacy. We can and should fight the violence and injustice happening in such horrific ways right now, but it will keep growing and coming back until we cut out the root.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus tells him, "God so loves the world...." The whole world. This story doesn't follow that one by accident. It is God, in action, loving the whole world: crossing boundaries, reaching out to the marked, and marking them as God's own people.

Jesus reveals his true identity to this woman: “I am.” The Samaritan community is alone in this gospel in recognizing who Jesus is, “truly the savior of this world.” The whole world. Repairing our broken and stained world, restoring God’s intended justice and righteousness for all people, is a very tall order. We can’t do it alone. We need to witness to others. Following the example of this woman, we need to be honest about who we are, everything we have ever done, or left undone, and the ways in which we have participated in or benefitted from systems of injustice and oppression, because Jesus meets us there.

Jesus sees our marks and continues to move toward us in love, marking us as God’s own, forever. Only through God’s help, following Jesus, can we be part of the healing and transformation of this world. Thankfully, Jesus crosses boundaries to come and meet us where we are, to see us as we are, to love us as God’s own, and to invite us to bring this good news of healing, reconciliation, and salvation to the whole world. May it be so.