

**St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
March 12, 2017**

Like Us in Every Way: Guilty

1. Valleys of guilt divide us

2. Grace builds a bridge

John 4:1-26

This morning I'd like to talk to you about geography.

This week I read an article about the southernmost county in West Virginia, McDowell County.

In the 1940's, it was filled with people. It is a picture postcard place to live.

But McDowell County is a coal county. The coal jobs are all gone. The population dropped from over 100,000 in 1950 to 21,000 today.

On top of that, McDowell County is a dangerous place to live. The roads are narrow and winding. Accidents are common. Because of the mountains, road building is neglected because it is just too expensive. It costs six times more per mile to build a freeway in the mountains of West Virginia than it does on the plains of Kansas.

They have tried to build roads. This is the Christine West Bridge. It towers twenty stories over the valley below. It was finished in 2007. But it is a bridge to nowhere.

McDowell County is a poster child for "nowhere."

What was true of McDowell County was also true of the village of Sychar. It was a poster child for "nowhere."



In Jesus' day, Jerusalem was the capital city, not only politically but spiritually as well. The temple was there. The religious elite all lived in the province of Judea.

But it was also the place of greatest danger for Jesus. John's gospel has this repeating theme of Jesus going to Judea, and then leaving because of the hostility of the religious elite.

Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John—² although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. ³ So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

Jesus spent most of his time in the northern province of Galilee. It was called “Galilee of the Gentiles” because so many non-Jews lived there. But even though Galilee was the spiritual backwaters of Palestine, it wasn’t the McDowell County “nowhere.” That designation better applies to the province in between.

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.

Looking at the map, it would seem obvious. Jesus had to go through the middle province of Samaria. But Samaria was the McDowell County “nowhere” of ancient Israel. No one “had” to go through Samaria.

This goes back hundreds of years. About 700 years before Christ, the Assyrian Empire had taken the Israelite tribes that had lived in this middle province off to exile, never to be returned. They brought in other people groups. They brought their own gods, and then mixed in a little worship of the LORD God of Israel too.

Because they mixed in the spiritual poison of idolatry, the Jews had nothing to do with Samaritans. In fact, Jews often would take a detour to avoid going through Samaria.

But it was into this “nowhere” place that Jesus bumped into a “nobody” woman.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water...

Guilt had isolated this woman. She came out to draw water at the “wrong” time of day. No one wanted to associate with her.

I wonder what kind of woman she was. Was she a gal that no guy was good enough for? Did she choose to leave one relationship to go to another? Or was she a woman who had been used and abused by one man after another?



We don't know her back story. All we know is that she was a "nobody" in a "nowhere" place. She was the McDowell County of ancient Israel. Cut off and not worthy of anyone's attention.

But someone decided to build a bridge.

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.)

This Samaritan woman knew the rules. Jews don't associate with Samaritans, least of all her. But this Jewish man broke the rules. He had come to build a bridge to "nowhere" to reach a "nobody."

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.

In this casual conversation, Jesus begins to build a bridge. But guilt not only divided this woman from others in her village, it divided her from the Guilt-bearer. Rather than freely admit her guilt, she sought to hide it.

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."

Ouch! Jesus was getting too close. He was building a bridge to “nowhere.” But this is the power of guilt. The closer to the solution for guilt that we come to, the more likely it is that we try to cut ourselves off from the one who could bear that guilt.

Jesus is getting too personal. So she changes the subject. Religion is all about rules. So let’s talk about rules. Where should we worship?

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.”

The woman wanted to shift this religious conversation to rules. But Jesus kept its focus on relationship. The only thing that matters is her relationship with the one who could bear her guilt.

The bridge is built. A bridge to nowhere.

This is what I want to celebrate first of all. Jesus doesn’t build the bridge to us because we have asked him for it. He builds it in spite of our opposition. Jesus doesn’t care if that bridge has been unused for 10 years like the Christine West Bridge. His work as our Savior is there... a beautiful structure, ready to bear the burden of our guilt, if only we are willing to bring our guilt to him.

It is in the Garden of Gethsemane that we see the beauty of this structure. It is possible only because God himself came to this earth. Last Wednesday we saw how he bent his will to the will of his Father, not because it was easy, but because he loved the Father and he loved the guilt-burdened.

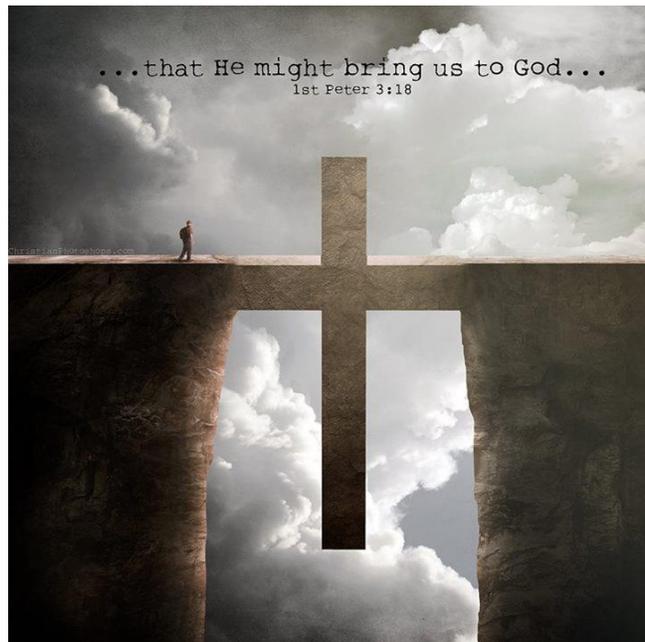
Sometimes we may feel that our guilt is too much to bear, that the cost and pain of our guilt is too much. Jesus came to save the Kansas plains type Christians, people who are generally pretty good already. But not West Virginia mountain people like us, people like this Samaritan woman who have pasts that make us ashamed. People who are burdened by “hidden” sins of abuse of alcohol or drugs, the hidden sins of pornography use, the burden of failure as husbands and wives and parents, those who have been sexually active... you name it. There is any number of

ways that Satan can remind us... we are nobodies in a spiritual nowhere. The cost is too high for God to save us.

But Jesus built that bridge to “nowhere.” Paul says, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Even though we were enemies in our minds because of our evil behavior, God reconciled us to himself through the death of his Son (Colossians 1:21-23).

McDowell County became a national news story because they are hoping that President Trump, with his talk of building roads and infrastructure, can make the impossible happen and make the Christine West Bridge to nowhere a bridge to somewhere, a bridge that help bring economic viability to this coal-mining county.

It won't make national news today. But a bridge is being built right here today... a bridge to nowhere that will become a bridge to everywhere. Right here and now God is showing you this bridge. Here are you and I on one side. There is heaven. And the cross of Christ is that bridge. It is already built. Let's confess that by nature we are isolated from God. In Isaiah 59:2 we hear this judgment: “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”



Then let's confess together this truth that bridges the gap: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity [guilt] of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).

This bridge to nowhere that Jesus built then becomes a bridge to everywhere.

The Samaritan woman... she couldn't contain what she had found. Someone was willing to talk to her. Someone had invited her to drink of the living water of eternal life. She told others. The bridge Jesus built to this Samaritan woman became his bridge to this entire Samaritan town.

Paul says the same thing in 1 Timothy 1:

¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

Why did Jesus build a spiritual bridge to a nowhere and a nobody like you? Because he loved you. And he loves those you interact with. That bridge to nowhere becomes a bridge to every person you see.

That's what our mission is: to be used by Jesus to be a bridge to everywhere: "By every possible means we bring every person within our area of influence closer to Christ." Amen.

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My Next Steps

- **Memorize Isaiah 59:2 – The Cause of our Separation:** But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.
- **Memorize Isaiah 53:6 – The Solution to our Separation:** We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity [guilt] of us all.
- **Build a Bridge:** Who in your area of influence feels separated... from others and/or God... because the guilt of past or present sin? How can you build a bridge to them?