

“Boundaries” Preached 02/12 Dr. Mack Sigmon

When I was growing up in North Carolina, there were woods across from our house on the other side of the main highway. Those woods were our playground for my very smart dog Fred, and myself; a sizeable landscape that we would visit and explore every day. There were paths, glades, and a small stream that cut through some of the least explored areas of the woods. My curiosity was always aroused by this mysterious barbed wire fence that passed through an especially dense stand of trees.

One beautiful Fall afternoon my curiosity got the best of me, so I crawled over the barbed wire, and held up the bottom strand so that Fred could pass under. Not going too far, I saw a well-worn path that clearly led toward bright daylight, indicating a possible field. As I walked along that path, it wasn't long before Fred became very agitated, with his ears alert, his tail down, and the hair on his back clearly on edge. At the same moment, I heard a crashing sound coming toward us in the direction of the path, breaking limbs and stirring up the leaves that lay heavy on the ground.

Even before I stopped to reconsider the situation, Fred took off in front of me, expressing a clear, low growl as he disappeared from my view. That was all the inspiration I needed to turn around and start running back toward the barbed wire fence, even as I heard the commotion of Fred's barking combined with the heavy sound of running. I grabbed the post and leaped over the fence. As I was catching my breath on the other side, the commotion stopped, and a few minutes later Fred came trotting back, covered in leaves and sticks and wagging his tail.

I never knew what was coming toward us or what Fred encountered, but later I learned there was a farm on the opposite side of those woods with several large bulls, with one that was considered dangerous. Whatever it was, one thing was certain – I never crossed that boundary again, and whenever I entered those woods from that time on, I appreciated the fact that someone had the good sense to keep in whatever might have gotten out. That barbed wire fence was a good boundary if ever a good boundary was needed.

Boundaries and borders can be good when they are established to protect life or enhance civility, no matter which side of the boundary we are on. From our earliest years, we are taught to respect the boundaries we encounter every day, whether we are crossing a street or staying on the other side of that fence with the loud, angry bark behind it. We have all heard that common saying – “Good fences make good neighbors,” and how can we doubt the truth of it? But boundaries can also be cruel and oppressive, creating divisions between prosperity and want, hope and despair, peace and violence, life and death.

Henri J. Nouwen in his book, “The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life” reflected on how his struggle to love God might free him to love the world in spite of its sinful nature: “The great spiritual task facing me is to so fully trust that I belong to God that I can be free in the world--free to speak even when my words are not received; free to act even when my actions are criticized, ridiculed, or considered useless.... I am convinced that I will truly be able to love the world when I fully believe that I am loved far beyond its boundaries.”

That “love beyond the boundaries of the world” spoken of by Nouwen was the same love embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, particularly when he confronted the boundaries and borders of his own religion. The story of the Pharisee and the Publican is a story of religious boundaries, but it is also a warning about the way we judge others, especially

those who live their lives on the other side of our boundaries, the ones we create not for our protection, but for the sake of our prejudices: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

To understand the depth of Christ’s parable, we must understand the depth of the physical and spiritual boundaries that divided the religion of the temple. Those boundaries were easiest to see in the geography of the temple complex and the names of its highly-segregated precincts. At the farthest boundaries of the temple complex was the Court of the Gentiles, the closest that any non-Jew could get to the inner temple without penalty of death. Next came the Court of the Women, named so because Jewish women could not go beyond it, followed by the Court of the Israelites, reserved for the righteous Jewish laymen. The Court of the Priests was the innermost court, in which stood the sacrificial alter and the entrance into the temple. The temple itself was divided by an inner room known as the Holy of Holies, accessible only by the high priests once-a-year, in which the living presence of God dwelled.

Christ’s parable is set in the Court of the Israelites, where it is obvious that even in the Court itself proximity matters. The Pharisee, belonging to a religious party centered on piety and obedience to the law, does not just reflect on his social status in his prayer to God – he gloats on it. The Pharisee’s prayer is one of thanksgiving, but not for his blessings or

the fortunate circumstance of his life— rather, he expresses thanks for the boundaries of his culture and his religion.

In stark contrast to the Pharisee is the physical proximity and prayer of the Publican. Christ tells the story knowing that his listeners would understand that the hated tax collector, a collaborator with Rome, is standing exactly where he deserves to stand in the geography of the temple – off in a corner, by himself, and praying exactly as he should pray in the social structure of his community: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

The shocking reality of Christ’s parable, however, is that only one prayer receives an answer – and it is the one that asks for an answer: “I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” The new spiritual boundary that Christ creates is an inner one, a boundary not of proximity or power, but between humility and pride.

The Messiah did not come to destroy all the spiritual boundaries, but to transform them from the hardware of religion to the software of the human conscience. The new boundaries of Christian conscience were built around inner discernment – the ability to compare ourselves to the love and teaching of Christ rather than compare others to our personal standards of righteousness. Theologian Marcus J. Borg clearly characterizes this transformation from outer to inner boundaries when he writes: “Jesus rejected the sharp social boundaries of the established social order and challenged the institutions that legitimated it. In his teaching, he subverted distinctions between righteous and sinner, rich and poor, men and women, Pharisee and outcasts. In his healings and behavior, he crossed social boundaries of purity, gender, and class... In his itinerancy, he rejected the notion of

a brokered kingdom of God and enacted the immediacy of access to God apart from institutional mediation.”

The most shocking revelation in Christ’s parable is that the same ugly, superficial boundaries that judged the Publican also opened for him a path to salvation and grace. In the culture of first century Israel, the Publican was always on the margins or beyond the boundaries, hated by his own people and, according to his religion, hated by God. There are many in our culture that dwell beyond the boundaries and margins of our institutional and cultural lives. They die in the desert; they languish in our hospitals and nursing homes; they suffer brutality in our prisons, or physical and sexual abuse on our streets. They are rejected by their families and their churches, and hated for the color of their skin. They cry for mercy, and we either ignore them, or fence our hearts to their suffering.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican shockingly declares that it is those we have judged beyond the boundaries who judge us – in their very cry for justice, mercy and forgiveness, they receive it, and the kingdom of God enfolds them in the infinite, unconditional, and unbounded love of Christ. So where does that leave us – are we on the inside looking out, smug Pharisees secure in the boundaries of our own piety, or are we on the outside looking up, sinners asking for God’s mercy, seeing and hearing the Publicans, joining them outside the boundaries even as we welcome them into our hearts?

I heard the answer to that question in Rev. Wendy Vanbderwal-Gritter’s book, “Generous Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church” “I want to remind pastors and leaders that we do not own the church—God does. We aren’t called to serve the church from a place of fear with our primary focus on protecting our boundaries. We are called to fling wide the doors, to invite to the banquet those on the margins, those who

will challenge our comfort and our aversion to getting our hands dirty. Announcing the kingdom is risky business.” Her question begs another one – will we take that risk? Bulls need boundaries; people need love; and Christ needs us to do it.