

Sermon

October 13, 2019

Proper 23C

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2 Kings 5.1-3, 7-15

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2.8-15

Luke 17.11-19

Boundary lines. Places of division. Places of encounter. Bridges. Borders. Places where things come together. Where and how people connect—or don't—fascinates me; what physically exists (or what we erect) to bring people together or keep them apart. Our territorial nature is one mark of us as a species (although we're certainly not alone in this). I mean, what happens when someone sits in OUR pew!? There goes Invite Welcome Connect! This, I want to make clear, isn't necessarily a bad thing; it's just . . . a thing. We can think of perfectly wonderful reasons for putting up a fence, like keeping rabbits out of our vegetable gardens, for example. Fences, on the other hand, as we know, can also be used for less mundane, and perhaps darker purposes. Where I want to focus, this morning, though, are not so much on physical boundaries, but "virtual" ones.

Theological boundaries were part of the rationale behind the development of creedal statements by our Christian forebears, as I've tried to emphasize in my class on "Caring About the Creed". One function of creeds was to separate "true" believers from "not-so-true" believers. If, for example, you could affirm the words of the Apostles' Creed, or, later, the Nicene Creed, you knew you were "orthodox"; you had access to the sacraments; you knew you were "saved". On the other hand, if you had problems distinguishing between "homo-ousios" and "homo-i-ousios" (see what you've been missing?!), pack your asbestos suit! The business behind the creedal boundary-making was BIG stuff . . . and it continues to be, in many cases.

Fortunately (in my view), we've seen some evidence of relaxation of that strict creedal boundary-observance in the last century. Indeed, today—just a few hours ago—in Rome, Pope Francis canonized John Henry Cardinal Newman as a saint. You may know that John Henry Newman was a significant player in the Church of England's Oxford Movement, and is partially responsible for the fact that we, at Good Shepherd have communion every Sunday, and with candles on the altar! Despite Newman's conversion to Catholicism (his logic led him to it, not a dissatisfaction with the Anglican Church), his canonization has been lauded by Anglicans, and was attended by the Prince of Wales . . . an Anglican! And, Catholicism benefitted from his Anglican sensibilities: greater involvement of lay people, and an appreciation of "tension" as opposed to an imposed theological "harmony". Newman has been a bridge between two theological worlds!

On the other hand, maintenance of ideological purity has not lost its grip on us—that is, we’d better stay on “our side” of the borders. The recent hue-and-cry over Ellen DeGeneres sitting with George Bush at a football game has been intense! (And who would have thought a sermon would contain a reference to both Ellen DeGeneres and Cardinal—now Saint—John Henry Newman!?) When pictures of her and the former president were made public, Degeneres commented:

Why is a gay Hollywood liberal sitting next to a conservative, Republican president? . . . Here’s the thing, I’m friends with George Bush. In fact, I’m friends with a lot of people who don’t share the same beliefs that I have. . . . We’re all different, and I think that we’ve forgotten that that’s OK that we’re all different . . . just because I don’t agree with someone on everything, doesn’t mean that I’m not going to be friends with them. When I say, ‘Be kind to one another,’ I don’t mean only the people that think the same way that you do. I mean, be kind to everyone. Doesn’t matter. (<https://tinyurl.com/y447v53f>)

The backlash, however, has been HUGE. While DeGeneres has had some high-profile supporters, her equally high-profile detractors wonder how she could call someone a “friend” who had worked against marriage equality, or whose record, with regard to the Iraq War, was so problematic. Some boundary walls are just too significant to be breached, it would appear.

Fortunately, I would say, there are other contemporary examples of boundary walls being overcome, with positive outcomes (and I, personally, would hope, in this regard, that the DeGeneres/Bush friendship might be an example for the rest of us)! In a recent episode of “OnBeing”, host Krista Tippett interviewed Matthew Stephenson and Derek Black. Black was the heir-apparent to one of the largest white-supremacy organizations in the country; Stephenson is an Orthodox Jew. Both attended the same college, living in the same dorm. When Black’s white-supremacist roots became widely known, it didn’t stop Stephenson from inviting him to weekly Shabbat dinners that he hosted. The result of those repeated encounters with the “hated other” led Black to renounce his supremacist views, with significant results.

Encountering our opposite—meeting at our boundary walls—is something most of us avoid like the plague. That tendency-to-avoidance lies behind one of the premises for the NBC show “The Good Place”. In that show, the main demon, Michael (an interesting name for a demon, given Christian tradition’s exaltation of St. Michael the Archangel)—Michael seeks to create an alternative kind of hell for

people by putting opposites together, trusting that their differences will drive each other crazy for all eternity. The problem is, much as with Black and Stephenson, that over time, the opposites begin to understand each other as subject to the same plight, the same fate. In one case, the opposites even become soulmates!

“Boundary lines. Places of division. Places of encounter. Bridges. Borders. Places where things come together. I’ve recently been captivated by this concept/idea of where and how people connect . . . or don’t.” Boundary lines—crossed at football games. Places of encounter—invitations to shabbat dinners. Bridges—religious converts with feet in two theologies.

Borders—between Galilee and Samaria. Between Aram (or Syria) and Israel. Ideological boundaries—between Jews and Samaritans, or Arameans and Israelites. Social boundaries—between Israelite slave-girls and Syrian generals. In our readings this morning from 2 Kings and Luke, those borders were rendered meaningless by something more existentially immediate than theological or political differences: the condition of leprosy.

Leprosy (or Hansen’s Disease), while treatable now, for millennia was considered, at the least, a social stigma, and perhaps a divine curse. Recognized as being communicable among humans, those suffering from the disease were kept separate from their “healthier” countryfolk, and were often forced—either by others, or out of need for human companionship—to band together into colonies. Such was the group of ten that encountered Jesus as he traveled to Jerusalem—so Luke tells us. And, unless Luke was totally clueless about Palestinian geography, Jesus’ encounter with the lepers at the “border” between Samaria and Galilee is meant to tell a deeper story than a simple travelogue! The fact that the ten lepers were Jewish and Samaritan together was significant for Luke. As his overall message was one of extending the gospel of Jesus beyond the borders of Jewish-ness, beyond national or ideological differences, having a mixed group of the “unclean” encounter Jesus was important to the Gospel-writer.

Equally important, if not more so, was the element in the story that had the Samaritan be the only one to return to Jesus to give thanks. A LOT can be made of that part of the story (and has been). What I see, however, is that Jesus didn’t care who came before him; he didn’t just answer the request of the nine Jews who cried for mercy. He addressed the need of ALL of them. And that universal response of Jesus was so overwhelming that the outsider, the Samaritan, was the only one who came to express his thanks. Jesus recognized the outsider’s gesture; not only was he cleansed of his disease by Jesus, but Jesus went one step further, making him whole.

In June of 2005, I was part of a similarly diverse group, as I rode my bike from San Francisco to Los Angeles, part of the AIDS LifeCycle, raising money for AIDS research. We were a collection of about 2000 people who moved, by stage, from north to south, along the border between healthy and not knowing about our health. We crossed boundaries: men and women, gay and straight, Caucasian and brown, Democrats and Republicans and Libertarians, able-bodied and those riding three-wheeled recumbent bikes because of balance issues . . . all of us journeying together to find a cure. And one thing I learned in that journey was that there was more than one cure we were all seeking. It was not just the “cause” for which we were raising funds. We were riding to make a difference, summoned by some “thing” greater that drew us into a unique, unified, community: that “thing” being a disease that knows no distinctions. The towns through which we rode knew what we were doing; they, too, saw a greater good at work than our many differences, or that disease which brought us together. Their support was evidence of their hope for change.

My brothers and sisters, there is so much that does, and would continue to, divide us. Yet, we are all people with “leprosy”, in search of a cure, of some hope. We, here, have been blessed in so many ways, yet, in other ways, we are so hungry. We are hungry for solidarity with others who share our doubts, our fears. In a society where “connection” seemingly is measured by Facebook “friends”, we want the healing power of real community. “No one, man nor woman, can stand alone; we are so constituted by nature”, wrote Cardinal (now Saint) Newman.

All members of every community are in need of being “made clean”, even more so of being “made whole”. And, so, every community and its members matter. And every encounter matters. While our human “territory-marking” exercise can have value in many ways, our clinging to artificial boundaries that deny our baptismal pledges to “strive for justice and peace among all people”, and to “respect the dignity of every human being” (BCP, 305) do not. On this point, Jesus and Ellen DeGeneres are in total agreement. To paraphrase them both: “When I say, [‘Love] one another,’ I don’t mean only the people that think the same way that you do. I mean, [love] to everyone.”

Yes, it’s difficult work to which Jesus calls us! Saint John Henry Newman, pray for us as we cross borders.

Amen.