

MESSAGE: “The Gift of Boundaries”

Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; Galatians 3:19-29

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to identify and emphasize necessary boundaries for living the Christian life.

Introduction

- I. What are boundaries?**
- II. Are boundaries good or bad?**
 - A. Freedom *from* boundaries (liability)**
 - B. Freedom *within* boundaries (gift)**
- III. Stewardship of boundaries**

Response to the Word

Introduction

When I was 11-years-old, I shared a room with one of my brothers. We all had room-mates in those days, so I was used to that, but this particular brother was a disaster when it came to house-keeping. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not a Felix Unger—just take a look at my office—but I do have some expectations. I get upset when a luncheon sandwich is left on the radiator for two weeks, or when I trip over discarded clothing on my way to the bathroom or when spilled juice stains a rug because it was never cleaned up. I confronted my brother multiple times over the four months we endured one another’s company and complained to my parents, but nothing improved.

One day, after finding ants swarming a sticky dish of who-knows-what, I had had enough. I divided the room in half, marked the division with masking tape and pushed all of his ‘stuff’ over to his side of the room. I then cornered my Mom and demanded the right to levy his allowance; a nickel for picking up a sock, a dime for cleaning up a spill, a quarter for making a bed. My Mom was usually sympathetic, but certainly not with a demand. Still, she heard my frustration, and I had new room-mate before the week was spent.

Boundaries. What are they? Where are they? When do you release them, and when do you make them stick? They are far more pervasive than you might think. The Bible opens with the story of Creation and by the time you reach verse four, God has set a boundary: “God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.” Boundaries separate, protect, hold accountable and define. It is a boundary which distinguishes one cell from another. Boundaries define seasons, behavior, the GPS and protocol. A boundary called ‘beach’ or ‘rocky shore’ divides the Atlantic from Down-East Maine. A boundary called ‘marriage’

protects the sanctity of commitment between two partners-in-life. The wall that Donald Trump wants to build at Mexico's expense would be a boundary between two nations. Even the clock which told us when to begin the worship service is a boundary which coordinated our diverse schedules. Simply put, boundaries are EVERYWHERE, and we could not function without them.

There are many who think the Bible is nothing but a litany of boundaries: Thou shalt have no other gods before me, thou shalt not make a graven image, thou shalt not use the name of God in vain, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not covet. "Is there anything thou shalt do?" they ask. One of the urban churches I once served had a sign on it that said, "Thou shalt not park here, lest ye be towed." It was an effective boundary, I suppose, but it certainly didn't communicate, "Open hearts, open doors, open minds!"

The Bible has many boundaries in it, for sure, but a quick reading might lead one to think that progressive faith is all about breaking down boundaries. Moses is tapped by God to free the Hebrew people from a boundary called slavery. One plague after another is sent to sever this pharaoh-set boundary. The crossing of the Sea of Reeds is a boundary dissolved to make way for the refugee people of God. The boundary walls of Jericho are overthrown to give the Israelites entrance. Ezra and Nehemiah break the boundary of captivity by guiding the Israelites to rebuild Jerusalem.

In Jesus day, God's people seek to end the boundary of Roman rule. Jesus breaks the boundary of gravity by walking on water, scarcity by feeding 5,000, and disease by healing lepers. In the opinion of the Pharisees, he breaks the boundary of Sabbath by healing on that day, the boundary of righteousness by eating with tax collectors, the boundary of holiness by forgiving adulterers, and the boundaries of racism and sexism by witnessing to a Samaritan woman. And what about the impenetrable boundary called death? Jesus rises from the tomb in Easter resurrection—the ultimate boundary-buster! After Jesus' death, his disciples Peter and especially Paul break down boundaries separating Jew from Gentile, slave from free.

The United States of America was established through boundary-resistance: 'No taxation without representation,' 'Don't tread on me,' 'Give me liberty or give me death,' and, of course, in New Hampshire, 'Live free or die.' Manifest Destiny compelled us to expand from sea to shining sea, and on to the islands of the Pacific. We embraced Cole Porter's standard, "Give me land, lots of land, under starry skies above, don't fence me in!" In addition, since World War II, we have burst through countless boundaries, some to our benefit, others perhaps not: splitting the atom, the Berlin air-raid, racial division,

contraceptives, sexual freedom, racing to the moon, surfing the internet, genetic manipulation, free-verse poetry, physician-assisted suicide, and the list goes on.

But here's the thing. Often we have embraced 'freedom *from* boundaries' at the expense of 'freedom *within* boundaries.' The first unravels a reckless ethic accountable to no one; the second inspires creativity, responsibility and a life of joy. The first says, "Why stay in a marriage if it is no longer fun?" The second says, "Go the distance and be faithful to the one you pledged yourself to before God." The first says, "Why help flood victims in Louisiana, when you can enjoy a cruise in the Caribbean?" The second says, "My life is connected to that of others. When they suffer, I suffer."

I once heard of a decision made by the Board of a private school. They didn't want their children to feel restricted by fences surrounding their playground. During summer vacation, they dismantled the fences. On the first day of school, when the kids were released to the playground, the staff was dismayed to see that the students huddled near the school entrance, afraid to venture forth. When the fences were restored, the kids felt safe and made use of the entire playground. They needed the definition provided by the boundary.

And so do we. The God who separated Day from Night, gave ten commandments to govern human behavior—not to cramp our style, but to define and protect the boundaries that preserve social respect and happiness. The God who promised to reverse the curse of sin did so by freely taking on the boundary of human flesh to be born in a Bethlehem stable and die in our stead on a Calvary tree. The Christ who ascended to heaven placed his Spirit in the boundary of the human heart to witness to God's unfailing and life-giving grace.

God's boundaries are gifts that guide us to miracles of wholeness, purpose and authentic joy. You have perhaps heard of the verse from Proverbs 29:18, "Where there is no vision, the people perish, but happy are those who keep the law." Without a defining vision of what God calls us to, each of us does our own thing to our own detriment and also that of the community. God's boundaries and vision keep us focused on growth, maturity and discipleship.

Let me close with an illustration of what this stewardship of boundaries might look like. It comes from an inspired book called *Boundaries* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend. The parents of a 25-year-old man came to see Dr. Cloud with a common request: they wanted him to 'fix' their son Bill. When asked where Bill was, they answered, "Oh, he didn't want to come. He doesn't think he has a problem."

"Maybe he's right," Dr. Cloud responded, much to their surprise, "Tell me about it."

The parents recited a history of problems that had begun at a young age. In their eyes, Bill never quite measured up. In recent years he had exhibited problems with drugs and an inability to stay in school and find a career. It was clear that they loved their son and were heartbroken over his way of living. They had tried everything they could think of to get him to change, but nothing worked. They told Dr. Cloud that they had always given Bill everything he needed. They had given him plenty of money at school so “he wouldn’t have to work and would have plenty of time for study and social life.” When he flunked out, they would find him another school.

After listening for awhile, Dr. Cloud interrupted, ‘I think your son is right. He doesn’t have a problem.’”

You could have heard a pin drop. Bill’s parents stared at their counselor in disbelief. Finally, the father said, “Did I hear you right? You don’t think he has a problem?”

“That’s correct,” Dr. Cloud responded. “He doesn’t have a problem. You do. He can pretty much do whatever he wants, no problem. You pay, you fret, you worry, you plan, you strategize, you exert energy to keep him going. He doesn’t have a problem, because you have taken it from him. Those things *should* be his problem, but as it stands they are yours. (pause) Would you like for me to help you help him to have some problems? I think it would help to clarify some boundaries so that his actions cause him some problems rather than you. You need some fences to keep his problems out of your yard and in his, where they belong.”

Setting boundaries may not be easy, but may be necessary.