

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“No Respector of Boundaries”

My office desk sits in front of a window that looks out on one of our church playgrounds. Now that the weather has finally warmed up the children of our preschool are playing outside more often and I love watching them run, explore, and chase each other. The kids were outside the other day and I noted what I see every day as I come in and out of the church building, and that is the pleasantly appointed fence that surrounds the yard. I'm sure there is a code of regulations that mandates we have a fence like this for a preschool but we'd have one anyway. There's a parking lot just beyond where the children play and the fence insures their safety. We would not want it any other way.

Because the sounds of the children cause me to pause a moment and wander away from what I'm working on, I sat there thinking about the fence around the playground. I thought, we experience all kinds of fences or boundaries in life. Taking the risk of sounding somewhat philosophical this morning, isn't one of the concerns we have in life trying to figure out our territory? We talk about what is called “healthy boundaries.” These life boundaries are the space between us. They are the buffer zone. The physical and emotional territories we create define who we are in relationship to everyone else. Like with the children on the playground, boundaries are often a matter of protection and safety. This is important because boundaries determine what is appropriate for us and they not only keep us from going out too far they also prevent others from coming too far in. As we grow and mature, we learn that living life without boundaries is reckless. It's risky. Children experience these lessons early on. It's wonderful to run and play and to be free to explore, but there are boundaries to our freedom and they are for our own good.

When the early Christian community first took shape the followers of Jesus experienced an intense conflict around spiritual boundaries. The question for us is to determine what a boundary in faith looks like. At issue for the early followers of Jesus was the determination of just how far God intended them to go. The fact that we are here this morning, that the Christian Church exists, is the evidence that the early message of Christ was proclaimed into every corner of the world. It's possible we take this for granted. We may not have the fullest appreciation for the struggle the early followers of Jesus had as they faced the barriers of their faith. The book of the bible we call “The Acts of the Apostles” tells the story of how the early church lived into the mission of Jesus. That mission, as stated in the Gospel of Luke, was to preach “repentance and forgiveness in [Christ's] name to all the nations.” (Luke 24:47) In Matthew's Gospel the mission of Jesus sounds like this. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matt. 28:19) There is no doubt that Jesus was rock solid in his understanding that the reality of God filling his life was to be extended to the lives of all people. This far-reaching, inclusive love of Christ was never intended to be fenced in. Still, there were significant barriers to overcome. The disciples heard Jesus' words on the matter but pushing through the limits of their faith was not easy. In fact, it could have gone either way. If things had been left only to the disciples, I dare say there would be no church. If the history of our faith had depended only on the preferences of the earliest followers, the story of Jesus would have died out long ago. But, they weren't left to themselves. Christ's mission refused to be defined by the limits in the minds and hearts of the early church. The Holy Spirit took hold of them. The Holy Spirit moved them beyond where they wanted to go and the result was a widening of the territory of God. How far did God intend them to go? Where is the boundary of the Christian faith? With the Holy Spirit stirring their minds and hearts, and with Christ's love pushing them farther and farther out, there was no limit to what God was doing through the followers of Jesus.

As stated earlier, the place where we've read is the Book of Acts but it is more accurate to call this section of the bible, The Book of the Holy Spirit. The apostles' actions were the result of the action of the Spirit. Here's a question. What is the Holy Spirit? In the Book of Acts, the Spirit is understood as the agent of God. The Spirit works in the lives of the believers on behalf of God's priorities and purpose. In the Pastor's Bible Study this past week we talked about the activity of the Holy Spirit. We wondered, “How do we experience it?” We talked about the Spirit being the assurance of God's presence. We said the evidence that the Spirit is with us can be a feeling. It's sensing we are not alone. We talked about how the Spirit makes possible in us what we didn't think was possible. This led us to reflect on the creative power of the Holy Spirit. I recalled what often comes to mind regarding the Spirit. In the beginning of the bible, in the story of creation way back in Genesis chapter one, we're told the “wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (Gen. 1:2) The Hebrew word for this wind is “Ruach.” It means Spirit. Just like the wind, you can't see it or capture it in a box but you can see the evidence of it moving. Ruach. The word, itself, conveys a dynamic power. In the beginning the Spirit, the Wind of God, Ruach, swept over the water and creation

was called into being. What is so striking about the Spirit's power is the way it creates something out of nothing. This is significant. The Spirit is the agent of God's creative power and the Spirit creates something that was not there before. In the beginning it gave birth to all of creation. In our lives it gives birth to new ways of thinking, new ways of loving, new ways of being God's people in the world. At first, Peter assumed the message of Jesus was only for those who were within the Jewish community. That was the boundary. When the Holy Spirit moved over the surface of Peter's mind and heart a new possibility was created in him. God's love wasn't just for those on the inside. God's love was for everyone on the outside. In Peter, the barrier was pushed wide open and the church was born.

We still struggle with how far God intends us to go and the Spirit still moves creating new ways of thinking and new ways of loving. The question I asked earlier was, "What does the boundary of faith look like?" Ruach...Ruach. The words "Christ's love" and "boundary" simply don't go together. At the places where our minds are made up or our limits are set the Spirit moves us to a new place. We are called to respond as Peter did. God is creating new thoughts we've never had before. God is helping us see others in ways we've never considered. God is creating new opportunities to include those in our love that we didn't imagine possible. In the beginning the world was called into being. In Peter's time the church was born when Christ's followers went beyond the boundary of Jewish tradition. Imagine what the Spirit is bringing to life in us as we share in Christ's mission in the world.