

Boundaries and Borders

January 31, 2016 Luke 4:21-30

Rev. Lesley Weir

Today we hear the end of a story that really began last week. So let's just recap quickly what went on last week. It is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Luke's gospel. We are past all the joyous and holy Christmas stories, past his baptism, past his temptation in the desert. He has emerged ready for the job at hand. He shows up in his hometown synagogue of Nazareth and begins to preach. He reads from the scroll of Isaiah. A text that promises

good news to the poor.
release to the captives
recovery of sight to the blind,
freedom for the oppressed.

Who wouldn't cheer for all of that? And he tells them that these promises of Isaiah, that beloved Old Testament prophet, these promises are now fulfilled, they are made real in the person of Jesus. And all seems well. This is after all, what the Hebrew folks have been waiting for.

And indeed, at first all does go well. Today we hear the reaction of the crowd to this preaching of his last week. They're impressed. They like what they hear. He has a golden tongue. A joy to listen to. And after all, he is one of their own. He's the hometown-boy-made-good. A celebrity of sorts in the surrounding areas. They take some pride in all of that. You understand. It's the same today. I went to high school with that famous rock star. We knew that movie icon when they were just a kid in the neighborhood. We all love to be able to attach ourselves to the coat strings of someone famous. And we can't help but think there might be something special, something extra for us in knowing this big wig!

The folks of Nazareth are probably thinking the same things. But then Jesus sort of gets in their face with it all. Because in reality, his message is so much bigger than anyone can imagine. And he needs them to hear the entire message. Not just the words of the prophet Isaiah spoken for them. No, Jesus knows that the words of the prophet really include everyone, the whole world, Jew and gentile alike, insider and outsider. And he goes to great lengths to make this clear to his listeners in the synagogue.

We could easily miss this today if we don't have our biblical history and characters clear. Jesus retells them stories of two of their most beloved and famous prophets, Elijah and Elisha. But the stories he chooses to tell them are not some of their favorites. No the stories he chooses to tell them are about outsiders. Stories about God's favor shown not just to outsiders, but to enemies no less. He reminds them that during the drought and famine of Elijah's time, God sent Elijah to "none of them EXCEPT" a widow in Sidon. By the time of Jesus, Sidon was Phoenician or Greek. And way before that, it was part of Canaan territory that was never part of Israel. So when God sends Elijah, in the midst of a famine, to save a widow in Sidon, God is actually bringing life, bringing salvation, to a non-Israelite, to an outsider, to a Gentile.

And the same is true of the story Jesus chooses to tell about Elisha. He reminds his listeners that there were lots and lots of lepers in that time in Israel; their own people. Yet "none of them" was cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian, the outsider, was cleansed. The one God choose to bring healing and wholeness to was one outside Israel. The message is clear. You think Isaiah's words are for you and you alone. But I must be the one to inform you that God has a bigger picture, MUCH bigger picture in mind. A picture that includes Phoenecians, Syrians, and as a matter of fact, anyone else you can think of. And

more importantly, not just people you can think of, but people you hate to think of. People you love to hate. These are the ones God saves in these two stories. Your out and out enemies.

And of course, that's when the real trouble begins. That's when folks become incensed. The text says they were 'filled with rage'. So much so that they ran him out of town and tried to toss him off the cliff. That's a whole lot of anger!

And for me that is the crossing point of this text into our lives today. Anger. There is so much anger out there. Anger, division, finger pointing, line drawing. We all seem so angry about something if we are honest. Psychologists will tell you that anger is what they call a secondary emotion. This means that anger is not the primary or first emotion. There is always some other emotion, even if so fleeting we don't recognize it, but some other emotion that precedes anger, that underlies the anger. We resort to anger out of a need to protect ourselves from whatever that first emotion was. Those first emotions are usually ones of vulnerability; fear, hurt, shame, rejection, humiliation, confusion. When we cannot deal with those vulnerable places in us, it is all too easy to flip into anger mode.

My hunch is that most of the anger in our culture right now rises from fear. We have a media that thrives on filling people with fears large and small, real and imagined. But I also think fear has always been a major driver of anger. It is why we build armies and walls. It is why we create boundaries and borders. We cling in desperation to what we know and what we have for fear of the unknown. We stay within our safe white suburbs for we fear what might happen to us if we venture into North Lawndale or Woodlawn. We live with hearts convinced of scarcity, and so even in our great affluence, we cling to our bank accounts and IRAs.

And at the very bottom of it all, I think we all live with the fear that we are not special enough, that we are not important enough, that we don't really matter. And that leaves us suspicious of others, fearful that they might get more recognition than we do. That leads us to draw lines in the sand that say 'we are in and you are out'. All to appease our vulnerable hearts. Of course, we don't see it that way. It is so very hard for us to see the absurdity of it all.

But a visual demonstration might help. Close your bulletin and take a look at the cover. This is a picture of what some would call God-forsaken land in western Ireland. It is called The Burren. You may have been there. I for one will never forget being there. It is the craziest landscape I've ever seen. It is this odd mix of flat top rocks with grasses poking out between for as far as your eye can see. You cannot imagine any possible good use for this land. In fact, in 1650 British military leader Edmund Ludlow declared: "(Burren) is a country where there is not enough water to drown a man, wood enough to hang one, nor earth enough to bury him."¹ It seems a fitting description. Yet as we drove through this land we noticed something very odd. There were the infamous Irish rock walls dividing up the land every where you looked. You can see them running along the left edge and the horizon of this photo. All of a sudden, one of our smarty pants kids said 'HEY...these are MY rocks....Keep out!'. We all busted out laughing at the absurdity of the whole thing. Indeed. Why were rock walls needed in this land of rocks? What could one person possibly fear losing to another?

And yet I think it's not that odd given who we are as human beings, given the place that fear takes up in our hearts and in our minds. And then Jesus comes and stands before us and says don't be afraid....of anything, of anyone. Jesus says to us we are loved beyond our imaginations and cared for and cherished.

¹http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/places/the_burren/burren_intro.htm

Jesus says to us 'quit building walls and borders and boundaries...it's not my way, it's not God's way.' And to prove it, he tells those two disastrous stories.

And if I am really honest, I can so easily say 'yep, I get it....everyone belongs, everyone is welcome; no borders, no boundaries here.' And I might wonder if most of you in the room are in the same boat with me. Because again with utter honesty, I think this is one of the mantels we progressive liberal Christians like to wave. We are all for everyone. But if I peer a bit deeper into my own life, I wonder how true that is. Why AM I living here in the safety, both economically and physically, of white western suburbia? Why ARE my doors locked every night and every time I leave my car parked outside? Why DO I have so many bank accounts; for savings, for retirement, for college (yes we are still paying all sorts of college expenses!)? I am all for helping the Syrian refugees find safety and shelter here in the USA, but I also wonder a bit about what that will really mean and look like. If I wonder too long, I might fall into some fear about the changing nature of the globe.

One day not too long ago, I saw a woman crossing the street in Downers Grove, across from Douglas Pharmacy. So right on Main Street, smack in the middle of town. And this woman had on the entire full burka with only slits for her eyes in the black fabric that draped her from head to toe. And it caught me breath and seized my heart. And a twinge of fear started to creep up. Not of her...but for her. And for others that would see her; children in particular. What did her dress say to them about women and freedom and dignity? And where would the entire religious freedom argument come into play? And on and on my mind twirled. As a woman who came of age in the liberation of women in both the culture and the church, I can tell you I was very unsettled by this experience.

But I think that is a good thing. I think that is an ok thing. Because I don't have to react out of fear that leads to anger. I don't have to say build a wall, keep them out, not in my back yard. I can instead look to Jesus who says 'no borders no boundaries', who says God used Elijah and Elisha to heal the outsider, who says 'I have come to bring good news to all...to all.' I don't have to be like those folks in The Burren who felt the need to protect 'their rocks' and perhaps I can use that image to remind me of the ways I absurdly DO build walls and borders and boundaries, all the while hiding under my progressive Christian mantel.

So what might have been the primary emotion that lead to such anger for Jesus' listeners in today's story? What do you think was their vulnerable spot that they had to cover up with anger? Were they afraid of something? Were they feeling rejected by the home grown star? Were they hurt that others would be invited to the feast, that the good news was for those whom they did not deem worthy? The thing is, Jesus came to try to get us to understand that all the rules are different for God. That mercy and inclusion beat out justice and merit every day. That it is not about us but about all. That there are no insiders or outsiders. That is not about anything we do or say or accomplish. And that can be frightening to many.

One of my favorite contemporary theologians has this to say about free grace:

"God's freely given grace is a humiliation to the ego because free gifts say nothing about me. The ego does not know how to receive things freely or without logic. It likes to be worthy and needs to understand in order to accept things as true. The ego prefers a worldview of scarcity where only the clever can win. That problem, and its overcoming, is at the very center of the Gospel plot line. It has always been overcome from God's side. The only problem is getting us in on the process!"²

² Richard Rohr, <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Mercy-before-Judgment.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=tl2m3hQkw28>, January 24, 2016.

Let's not toss Jesus over the cliff! Amen.