

FEBRUARY 15, 2009  
EPIPHANY 6  
“BOUNDARIES”

Let us pray: Protecting God, help us in our need to set appropriate boundaries to foster our safety and the safety of others but help us to see in Jesus how you also call us to cross boundaries for the sake of the Gospel. It's in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Robert Frost put the dilemma well in his poem regarding two differently-minded neighbors regarding the wall that divided their properties. “*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,*” noting how walls—especially walls made of rocks—have a tendency over time to fall apart and need continual mending. Something there is indeed that doesn't love the ugly dividing barrier that Israel has erected against its Palestinian neighbors, usurping Palestinian land—including generations old Arab-owned farms and olive

orchards—in its futile quest to wall off its justice-seeking as well as angry neighbors, a few of whom are willing to resort to terrorism in quest of their historic homeland.

And lest we Americans get too judgmental about all this, even now an ugly wall—or fence—is arising on our southern border walling out what many think is another futile effort to let a wall substitute for justice—a fair and equitable immigration policy. And lest we think this is solely a partisan issue let’s remember how it was President Reagan who went to Berlin over twenty years ago now and demanded peremptorily: “Tear down this wall, Mr. Gorbachev.”

But the other side is given voice by Frost’s neighbor who in the poem cites the old adage we know so well: “*Good fences make good neighbors.*” But “why” the poet wonders: We don’t have any cows. “*Before I built a wall,*” he muses, “*I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out*”—and

then repeats his refrain: “*Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.*” But his neighbor comes back with his ancestral contrapuntal refrain, one learned from father before him, “*Good fences make good neighbors*” and the poem ends on that unresolved note.

There’s been a lot of talk in the church in recent years about “boundaries,” as long hushed-up stories of clergy sexual abuse have been aired and bishops and those in authority have been learning at long last to take allegations of abuse and harassment seriously and put in place policies and procedures that protect the victimized as well as hold responsible the victimizer—rather than simply and secretively attempt at all costs to try to avoid scandal by quietly moving the perpetrator on to a new position in another place—where of course for the more serious offenders the same old behaviors could be expected to be repeated. This has been most outrageous, of course, in the Roman Catholic church and

especially here in LA where Cardinal Mahoney, for whom we pray regularly, still is far from satisfying his critics. But just last week I heard a report wide spread sexual abuse in orthodox Jewish yeshivas—and of course both among our homophobic evangelical sisters and brothers and, alas, also sometimes in our own main-line denominations. But at least we have recognized the problem—if not entirely solved it—even though all too often the church seems motivated more by liability to lawsuits and bad publicity than by the need to do justice and show mercy.

Today's Gospel story at first sounds much like the exorcism and healing stories that we've heard in Mark's Gospels the last couple of weeks. Only this time it's a story about a man with leprosy, which as you probably know also makes this a story about boundaries. Now biblical scholars will be quick to point out that "leprosy" in the ancient world was a kind of generic word

used to describe all kinds of visible skin diseases and not just the loathsome “Hansen’s Disease” that we were led to think of as leprosy as kid—you, know where hands and feet fall off and all that.

The point is that people with skin disease—what I’ll now just keep calling “leprosy”—were feared to be a threat to society and so were declared by Torah—the Jewish law—to be ritually “unclean” or “impure”—a religious classification that included lots of other persons whose maladies or behaviors or even their diet or occupation were thought to be dangerous to the health and well-being of the people of Israel.

In fact, just a few chapters earlier than the proscription against same-sex relations between men that we find in the Book of Leviticus chapter 18 along with a host of other sexual and dietary no-nos, we find a whole chapter of 59 verses devoted to how a leprous person was to be treated by the

community followed by a chapter of 57 verses describing the ritual to be followed in restoring a cleansed, formerly leprous person back into the community.

Verses 45 and 46 of chapter 13 of Leviticus, for example, reads:

*The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.*

And so you have the context for today’s story about Jesus’ healing of a man with leprosy, including the interesting detail of Jesus sending the newly-healed, cleansed and purified former leper off with the words, “*go show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them*” —precisely what chapter 14 of Leviticus describes in the

greatest detail, the ritual by which a cleansed leper may be restored to the community.

For, you see, Jesus' physical healing of the leper wasn't at all enough. To make him **whole** he needed to be restored to the community and the priest was the gate-keeper of this restoration process. It was the priest's seal of approval, his "bill of health," that was needed. And like any "bill of health" there was a cost involved—two male lambs and a grain offering and an offering of oil, or something a bit less if one were poor. Listen to this from Leviticus: *"The priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering and put it on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, and on the thumb of the right hand and on the big toe of the right foot.* (Now maybe you can see why Namaan the Syrian of our Old Testament reading was so upset with the prophet Elisha for telling him to simply "go and wash" in the Jordan—no liturgical hocus pocus, no magic ritual—while

Namaan had come all the way looking for something a bit more complicated—and willing to pay lavishly, as the story makes clear.)

Jesus here simply seems to be in the mode of the plain-spoken prophet Elisha—no priestly mumbo-jumbo of his own—just the healing and let the priest take care of certifying it all. Which again leads us to think, doesn't it, that Jesus isn't much into boundary-keeping, he isn't into “toeing the line” or “coloring inside the lines” as we like to say. And so, as we'll see soon enough, “Out of bounds!” the Pharisees, the religious referees in the black-striped shirts will soon be found shouting at Jesus, for this and myriad other imaginative ways Jesus will find to cross boundaries—from healing on the Sabbath to touching a woman with a flow of blood, from raising the defiled corpse of a little girl to eating with sinners and tax collectors—and even—as we'll hear at the very beginning of the Passion story

which we'll read together on Palm Sunday — that time, two days before the Passover, when Jesus will find himself in Bethany at the home of **Simon the Leper** — who knows, perhaps today's nameless leper now made whole and returned to his home and family? And yet, notice, he's still called "Simon the Leper" for one doesn't ever completely leave one's past does he or she?

But the story goes on: "*As Jesus sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.*" To which Jesus responded, cutting off the criticism of those who thought she'd crossed the line — broken the boundary: "*She has anointed my body before its burial. Truly, I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her*" — in memory of her,

she who like her master, crossed the boundary.

The good news, sisters and brothers in Christ, is that despite our need for and conscientiousness about appropriate boundaries — what’s in, what’s out; what’s safe, what’s not; what’s healthy, what’s sick — ours is a God who is unafraid of being defiled but whose compassion for us “crosses the boundary” between divine and human, the pure and the sinful, the chaste and the unclean. It’s not so much that Jesus is an aninomial or an anarchist intent on breaking every law he ever encountered as he is intent on making himself ritually unclean in solidarity with, for the sake of, those who stand excluded outside the circle of acceptance, those most in need of cleansing and restoration to genuine community.

God, as Jesus makes crystal clear in his inaugural sermon to his home town folks in his Nazareth synagogue recorded in Luke

chapter 4 quoting the prophet Isaiah says that God “*has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” At first his home town friends and neighbors oohed and aahed over the “authority” with which their “home boy” spoke. But then Jesus crossed the line by reminding them of the old saying “*No prophet is accepted in his own hometown*” as he sensed their eagerness to now practice some of those same healings he had gained such a reputation for in other nearby towns. Only then does Jesus have the temerity—the brash, boundary-breaking gall to remind them of today’s very story of Namaan the Syrian—this Gentile foreigner—whom the prophet Elisha had healed of his leprosy—and as if that weren’t enough he also throws in their face the famous story of the prophet Elijah’s miraculous feeding of the widow of Zarapeth—another boundary-

breaking story of compassion for a Gentile widow and her son. And Luke says, the home town crowd tried to thank Jesus for reminding them of these biblical incidents by trying to push him off a cliff—for daring to transgress the boundaries of their hospitality by reminding them of the boundary-breaking actions of God’s prophets of old. Those stories are “out of bounds” his fellow Nazirites felt, inciting them to violence. Some still do—think Jesus is “out of bounds.” And for the sake of salvation—which literally means “healing”—thank God he is.

As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: *“Therefore Jesus also suffered **outside the city gate** in order to sanctify the people by his own blood.”* Or as the Letter to the Ephesians puts it: *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both*

*groups into one and has **broken down the dividing walls of hostility between us.***”

Yes, I suppose good walls make good neighbors. But broken-down walls make even better ones. For “*something there is that doesn’t love a wall.*” I think that “something” is God.

The peace that passes understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.