

Borders & Boundaries - The Limit of Limits  
TUMC Sermon  
2016 06 26

2 Kings 2: 1-2, 4, 6-14  
Luke 9: 51-62

I recently realized that, for all the failings of the English Comprehensive Education system, every child has the chance to develop an extensive knowledge of siege warfare. Britain is full of castles. I grew up scrambling up and down earthworks, playing in towers, peering down murder holes and oubliettes, and going up and down endless flights of spiral stairs.

At some point in my childhood I grasped what a castle is - a way of arranging stones, earth, and humans so that it is easier to kill people. Castles aren't just defensive structures, they are tools of conquest.

Castles are not neutral. You build one to assert a claim, project power, and increase the vulnerability of your enemies.

Christian Peacemaker Teams in Europe has been talking for years about 'Fortress Europe' and the thousands of migrants drowned or killed trying to enter Europe. These last years we have heard more of these stories as the death toll has risen.

The reaction of European governments, by and large, has been to make it more difficult for people to make the crossing. Instead of search and rescue they deploy warships to threaten refugee ships. They use language of human trafficking to criminalize people responding to a desperate human need.

Borders are not neutral. They may be natural, like rivers or mountain ranges, like the Aegean sea or the Nevada desert, but they are also enforced and created and in some sense arbitrary. Last week, I was a European, now I am British. Fortress Europe has designed borders to make it hard for refugees to arrive, to make it more likely that they will drown before they arrive and become the responsibility of European nations. Borders in our world today function to limit life.

Yet borders and boundaries are a part of creation. In Genesis, God shapes the world by dividing the light from the darkness to create day and night, and by creating a firmament to divide the water in the sky from the water below, and then dividing the dry land and the waters.

Let's consider borders and boundaries in Toronto. I learned to know Toronto as a series of boundaries. I arrived in 2010 when Toronto played host to the G20 gathering. And when I say host I'm aware that this word has many connotations. The host can refer to the bread of communion. It can mean someone with guests. It can also mean someone with a tapeworm. So Toronto hosted the G20, which required a literal fence cutting off a section of the downtown. It was a border with guards, special laws, and it demonstrated the existing division between rich and poor, decision-maker and consumer, north and south, etc.

If you want to make an imprecise distinction, I would define a border as something that keeps out and a boundary as something that keeps in, or holds together.

The G20 fence is gone, but Toronto has plenty of boundaries. We are a city of neighbourhoods. Some are ethnic, or historic, or have a particular income level. And there are larger groupings like Ford Nation. These are geographic boundaries but also social boundaries. Are they good or bad?

Boundaries are particularly important for us as a religious community. If you think of a boundary as something that 'binds' us together, then that is something very close to a broad definition of 'religion'. Something that binds people together.

So what binds us together? How does that affect those who are not bound up with us? How porous are our boundaries? How do we define ourselves internally and externally? And how do we experience or ignore these boundaries? What are the boundary markers?

The church has things like baptism and communion to define boundaries, and we have many other less visible boundaries. I'm able to teach Sunday school, and to have my marriage to my husband blessed here, but am I able to serve as a pastor? How would I know? Where are the boundary markers? What other boundaries are there? Who is not able to be here on a Sunday morning due to illness, anxiety, family commitments, work schedule? How would we see the boundary holding them away?

When I think about boundaries in the church, I think about boundaries that must not be crossed. I think about friends and colleagues working with SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) to compile and release lists of Mennonite pastors who crossed boundaries and broke sacred trust. There are boundaries that ensure safety. And there are many ways to cross these boundaries, and priests and pastors of all denominations including Mennonite that have demonstrated skills in violating boundaries and covering their tracks.

Boundaries are not just defensive. Boundaries are also places of creativity and life. The 11th principle of Permaculture identifies the productivity of edges and marginal spaces where different zones meet. Permaculture gardens are designed with long curving edges to maximize the amount of boundary space. And it goes beyond gardening.

Toronto is a creative and fruitful cultural space. When we acknowledge the Indigenous nations of this territory we talk about this as a place of many peoples. What are the advantages of being part of a liminal, multi-boundary, multi-bordered city?

I hope that these are questions we'll all consider as the series goes forward and each preacher engages borders and boundaries in the context of our community and God's mission for us.

Michele began our series last week with a concerted effort to not be a fence-sitter. She identified some of the dynamics of engaging with a boundary already in place, part of the landscape, and the temptation to position oneself as neutral and the competing responsibilities to those on either side of the fence.

We all have these places in our lives where we can be fence-sitters. We aren't affected by the issue and maybe have something to gain by staying out of it. But fences are not neutral structures. They are constructed. It is hard to cross fences, it comes with a cost. Fence-sitters do not make it easier.

I want to talk about this act of crossing borders and boundaries. Turning to our scriptures. Where do you see boundaries in these accounts?

The two readings are quite alike in some ways. Elijah is travelling to the place where God will whisk him away from Earth in an incident that deserves an entire devoted sermon. Jesus is travelling towards Jerusalem as the time approaches for him to be taken up to heaven, as the text says in another phrase that deserves an entire sermon. As they travel, there is a sense of peril. Elijah repeatedly asks his comrade Elisha to remain behind, but he persists in accompanying. Jesus and his disciples encounter some hostility, and when people seek to be his disciple, he makes difficult demands of them.

Elijah keeps trying to set boundaries, while Elisha keeps on following him. In the end, Elisha inherits his mentor's authority and power. Is that why he is following him? It would seem to be a mix of loyalty and a certain presumption, a desire to be not just a follower but an inheritor.

Reading the story, and thinking about Elisha as someone who is pushing boundaries, I am uncomfortably reminded of harassing behaviour and lack of respect for boundaries. This behaviour that we commend in Elisha would be stalker behaviour in another circumstance. He does not know how to take a hint, how to be told no. Can we tell this story of pushing boundaries while emphasizing the need to respect others?

The two prophets cross the quintessential border, the Jordan river, together. Elijah is taken up into heaven, another metaphysical border crossing, and Elisha is left alone.

Jesus is also headed for his rendezvous with eternity in Jerusalem. He attempts to stay at a Samaritan village but is turned away, because he is heading for Jerusalem, probably understood to be a pilgrim to the temple. But he has something else in mind. There is a sense of hurriedness in these stories. When I read this over I think of that crisis-time phrase "either lead, follow, or get out of the way". He does not engage the Samaritans, he takes their refusal, restrains his disciples from doing anything unwise, and moves on. As people approach him, he does not stop to talk, to accommodate them. It is as though his time is up and he has no more wisdom to share.

The boundary he will cross in Jerusalem is also metaphysical, and horrible, and hard to understand. Jesus not only crossed the boundary from life to death and back again, but altered that boundary on behalf of us all.

There's a picture of endurance in the Bible - withstanding attacks, remaining faithful, not succumbing to temptation. I associate that with the Mennonites, being faithful in persecution. And, there is a parallel picture of persistence.

Persistent widow - she achieves justice from an unjust judge by refusing to give up.  
Or what about the enigmatic statement  
'On this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail'.  
An aggressive image. An image of an army besieging a fortified city or castle.

As a Church we maintain certain boundaries, who we are and what we do, and we also push boundaries.

Where are we like an army or a persistent widow? Where are we out in the world being nuisances that do not give up, that accept the risks, and put our hand to the plough without looking back?

It is a model of Christianity that scares me. It is risky, it exposes vulnerability, and it has done great harm to colonized nations.

It is also a model of Christianity that excites me. Faith that takes risks, that helps us in our vulnerability, and that actually damages the death-dealing and life-limiting powers of our world.

We're going to have to push some boundaries, cross some borders, and put our hands to work pulling down walls. Jesus is on the other side of those walls already and if we want to follow him, we're going to have to go where he goes.

Let's pray for the spirit of God to help guide us. Individually, so we can each set and respect healthy boundaries. As a community, so we can know the boundaries we need to push and the borders that Jesus is asking us to cross with him. And as a church, that we will be doing the work God has called us to in the world God has joined us in.

Amen.