

Boundary Keeping or Grace?

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146;
James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

(Before I begin, let me just say a word about the context in which this reading from the Gospel occurs: Jesus has just been roundly criticized by the Pharisees and religious leaders for His inability, and His followers' inability, to keep purity laws and dietary laws, and you would think that would be enough to slow him down. But what does Jesus do, but He turns around and goes to the outsiders, to the Gentiles, and offers them the forgiven healing of God's grace.)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Lord and Jesus Christ. Amen.

“There'll be no Micky Doos coming into this house, so get that into your head!”

My father was making one of his dinner table proclamations. From what I remember of an earlier childhood, my father always made pronouncements like this at the dinner table. His remarks, in this case, were intended for my older brother and sister who were of marriageable age.

What concerned my father was the fact that they might start dating members of the local Roman Catholic Church. Micky Doos my father called them. In my father's mind all Catholics, no matter what, were Micky Doos, and he was making it clear that there would be no mixed marriages in his house. Only Anglicans (of which my father was a member) and Presbyterians (of which my mother was a member) were eligible in my father's mind.

The faithful Jewish people of Jesus' time and their religious leaders were also concerned to establish clear boundaries around their faith. There was always the danger of peoples of other religious persuasions influencing and changing their faith and religious practices, not to mention the very real danger (in their minds) of offending and angering God. So it is that, not only did Jesus create concern and division with His reinterpreting Jewish faith, He acted like God by healing people, since everyone in Jesus' day was in agreement that the possessed, the handicapped, the ill suffered so because of God's punishing their sinfulness; the problems they had were well-deserved, indeed.

And there was Jesus, in the midst of all this, healing people, acting like God, forgiving them, and ending their punishment. Worse, He was healing Gentiles, those outside the pale. What's at issue in the gospel this morning is: Who really sets the boundaries – people – us – or God? And how are people to know how to keep to them? All of which points to the concerns each and everyone of us has about the appropriate boundaries and behaviors maintained by our denomination and by our own community of faith. The difficulty becomes immediately evident in how denominations divide themselves over purely human theories dressed as theology and the

fact that we all confess the same God, the same Christ, and the same Holy Spirit in a way that seems to be little more pious platitude.

Similarly politicians constantly highlight moral and social boundaries, which are also of great concern to us and to our nation. Unfortunately, though, they raise up such issues more for their emotional impact on the electorate than for the serious public investigation and discussion for which they really call.

Emotional impact. Such a mild term for what was to happen at my home when my brother announced at the dinner table that he was engaged to marry (gasp). . . a Roman Catholic girl. For a few days my father was unable to proclaim anything, let alone speak at the dinner table. But we all read them, the signs were ominous indeed. An intense black emotional silence hung over the dinner table at each and every meal. And then it came – an eruption of Vesuvian proportions. The rich variety of my father’s verbal fire was so colored, so varied. . . but I dare not repeat it from a pulpit today.

When it was over, we were all quaking in our shoes. My eyes were glued on my brother who calmly sat through it all and told us in a quiet voice, that everything was already arranged. He and his beloved had spoken to the priest, the day of the wedding was set, and there it was. My father was furious, apoplectic – but what could he do?

I wonder if faithful people hearing of what Jesus was up to might have experienced a similar fury and apoplexy? Or if not that, at least very deep concern? The history of the faithful people of Israel was one long saga on maintaining their identity, given in the covenant at Mount Sinai and secured by priests and prophets against numerous outside threats. They had to struggle against the cultures and religions which surrounded them constantly threatening to dilute and alter their religious identity. Finally, after their return from captivity in Babylon, they developed a new self-assurance, a stout religious orthodoxy and they drew a firm line between the Jews, on the inside, and Gentiles, (everyone else), on the outside. The same for disabled, the possessed and the ill, all sinful, all suffering God’s just and righteous punishment.

Then onto the scene comes this Jesus of Nazareth who challenges much of the accepted orthodoxy, does what any religious and righteous Jew would tremble to do, and takes His message and His healing powers to the Gentiles. Healing a Syrophenician woman’s daughter and a deaf man from the Decapolis, Jesus really upsets the apple cart.

That this is a major challenge to the boundaries of the faithful is even evidenced by Jesus Himself in His initial response to this woman. She makes a request, He says, like a dog begging at a table for food that really is the fare of the master and the household. It’s a downright offensive thing to say, even in our day and age. Can you imagine saying to someone who requested your assistance, “you’re a dog and you don’t deserve it”? Yet He softens His stance and heals the woman’s daughter.

The hearts of the Jewish people who knew about this, as a result were hardened, shocked, and outraged. Her healing had nothing to do with her moral conduct, nothing to do with her religion, nothing to do with who or what she was. There went all the religious and moral understanding of the people, the boundaries had been totally ignored, and what the people considered to be

righteousness was suddenly demolished before their eyes. There was nothing left to discuss. God, in Jesus, had acted with compassion, understanding, grace and healing to those who did not and should not have belonged. It was a done deal.

Now, if we are not upset, concerned, miffed by where we are with this text, then I think there is something wrong with us. What the gospel is telling us is that God decides where and to whom He will extend His grace and to whom He will issue an invitation to the kingdom. So what are we to believe? Has God actually thrown the baby out with the bath water? Or has dear old Stew, bless his heart, wandered off on a well meaning but mistaken tangent?

Is it not true that we too are consumed with concern that we live lives faithful to God in Christ? That our behavior upholds the highest standards of the Christian faith? That there are very real boundaries in the Christian community which need to be promoted and preserved? We know what they are, don't we? Or do we?

Some of us try every day to live as followers of Christ. Some of us live and act as disciples from time to time, when it occurs to us, when it dawns on us that we are called to act on our faith. Some of us, I guess, are here in hopes that having not done so well, we might actually be forgiven, given a second chance, inspired, and sent out into the world to give it another go. And some, some have given up altogether because the demands have overpowered the good news.

Over and over again we are concerned with how things are going in our church and in our world. We feel deeply concerned about all the changes going on, some of which seem frivolous and others even untoward. We are concerned for conduct and morals and maintaining Christian standards. We struggle with our role as voters in an increasing climate of divisiveness, negative campaigning, emotional appeals, and we wrestle with a suspicion, if not the conviction, that we can't believe the press or the radio or television any more. So when we come to this morning's gospel, how are we to come to grips with it?

Is Jesus saying anything goes, bring down the barriers, erase the boundaries all is free and filled with grace? Or is He making a much more subtle and heart piercing point?

There's no mistaking it, if we listen to the gospel and see it in its context. Set in an atmosphere of concern and criticism regarding the appropriate keeping of purity and dietary laws, Jesus extends God's grace to the Gentiles, the outsiders, the oppressed, the unwanted, the absolutely religiously condemned. At least in the minds of those who saw themselves as faithful.

And then, of course, the question becomes – other than the Syrophenician woman and the deaf man in the Decapolis – who are the real outsiders, the really religiously condemned? The answer, beloved, is us! Yes, and all the other candidates that have come to minds while I have been speaking. Until we grasp that reality, until we realize how profoundly sinful we really are, we will continue to miss Jesus' point.

Are we not God's beloved? Have we not already confessed our sins and received absolution? Will we not receive tangible assurance of our forgiveness and have renewed to us the promise of life now and hereafter when we take the body of Christ? All that, despite the fact that when we leave this place, we will only sin again. Unless, of course, we fall into sin before we leave.

The purity Jesus demonstrated lies in the ability to receive God's forgiving grace, and once having received it, to live as people of grace and compassion and forgiveness and love. You see, the song we all know did get it right: "You will know they are Christians by their love."

The key to securing the heart of the faith is not to be found in policing the boundaries, nor to condemn and reject the sinful and the wicked, but only when we reach out to them as Christ would. Then and only then will we preserve the heart and life of the faith. Then as the forgiven and redeemed respond to that grace in their lives with faithful obedience, with dedicated giving and stewardship, then the real heart and shape and definition of the community of faith will become evident to all. For though we will have been condemned by the law, we will have been rescued and set free by the gospel. When we hear the Word, when we gather to receive bread and wine, when we realize Jesus gave his life for us, then – and only then – will we be set free to let God decide the boundaries while we focus on imitating Christ.

After the wedding, our family slowly and partially adjusted to my brother and his wife, and slowly his wife became one of us. At least while my brother was still alive. Though every now and again when she and my brother were not around, the subject of Roman Catholicism raised its ugly head. It was discussed in negative terms and understood to be the root cause of all the faults my family found with my brother's wife. For my brother and his wife, the end result was they distanced themselves from the church, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, and never became part of a congregation. Even their sons, to this day, have nothing to do with the church.

When my brother was ill and dying I pleaded with him by phone and by letter to see a protestant minister just to talk with him. I told him it would ease his suffering and help him with his dying. I did the same with his wife. I encouraged her to seek out a priest and talk with him. I told her it would help her with that with which she was struggling, and that it would aid her when my brother died. Neither of them did what I requested, and word leaked out to my family of what I had written and said, and I became the target of withering criticism by phone and by letter.

It seems to us, doesn't it, that being separated from faith and church all was lost because of this terrible human misjudgment and intolerance. But then I read this morning's gospel and I am assured that though my brother and his wife may have been lost to the church, they will never be lost to Christ. Thanks be to God.

Amen.