

Crossing Boundaries. Jan 29th (Intergenerational)

Galatians 3:28. Colossians 3:11-14. Acts 10: 1-48

“Crossing Boundaries.” What do those words mean to you? Is a boundary something that instantly causes you to stop? Or do you see a boundary as a challenge to overcome? Well, perhaps that depends on the kind of boundary you are facing.

A “Road is closed sign” for example, – well that is a warning that we must stop for our own safety and the safety of others. But in the days before roads and fast traffic, early pioneers and explorers faced boundaries like mountains, rivers, and forests – all of which they would have to conquer to move forward.

Sometimes the boundary is a little less physical, and more like a dividing line. A line that protects our territory. Animals in the wild, for example, mark their territory by leaving their scent on rocks or trees – like a warning to other animals. And humans also have territory boundaries – like border crossings between countries, maybe gates around our properties, signs to indicate crossing provinces or townships. We don’t leave our scent, at least I don’t think we do but we do protect our territorial boundaries.

And then there are boundaries that are set by our culture. And these may be different customs from one society to another. In our PD on Friday, we were looking at some of those different customs – different ways we eat, different types of ceremonies, different customs around our clothing and so forth. And one of the ones that we found fascinating was the different customs around greeting each other. You see, if you are going to make any attempt to cross the boundary of cultures, then one of the most important things is learning to greet each other. Learning how to welcome each other.

So, I have a little quiz for you all – with the youth’s help. We have some different customs of greeting, and we want you to guess where the custom comes from:

Tibbet. Maasai (Kenya/Tanzania). Japan. France. Thailand. Hongi (New Zealand). Malaysia. Bronx N.Y. (Cool Dude). Extra Terrestrial (ET)

You see it is important to understand another person's culture and traditions if we want to communicate to them. The greetings may feel strange, different, maybe even uncomfortable for us – but that is no reason for us to dismiss them. If we do – that is when we put up boundaries.

The story I told today was based on Acts chapter 10. It was about two groups of people – the Goy people (which is the Yiddish word for Gentile) and the Idishe people, meaning Jewish. If you read the story in the bible, you will learn that the Jews and the Gentiles did indeed have different languages, different holy days, different religious beliefs, and different customs around food. It was forbidden for any Jewish person to eat Gentile food because it had not been killed, prepared and cooked in a certain way that was according to Jewish customs. Jewish law considered it 'unclean' and 'sinful' for any Jewish person to receive hospitality from a Gentile.

But in the bible, Peter (a Jew) is guided by God in a dream to go to Cornelius (a Gentile). Just like in the story I told, where the stars lead the Goy hunter into the Idishe village.

And in the bible story, Peter is told to eat the food that Cornelius offers him, even though it was strange and against his Jewish customs – just like in our story when the hunter and the elder sit down and eat together, sharing blessings, stories and laughter.

And in the bible story, Peter knew that his actions would make the Jewish authorities angry; just like the Goy Hunter knew that his elders would not like the fact that he was wearing Idishe furs, or had eaten Idishe food.

But in both stories – the exchange between Peter and Cornelius – the exchange between the Goy hunter and the Idishe elder – both stories represented a beginning of breaking down boundaries.

Acts 10: verse 34 Peter says:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but accepts from every nation

What boundaries do we put up?

Some of you may remember the term “blockbusting” that was used to describe when the first black family moved into an all-white area. Or when black children entered all-white schools for the first time. We might remember those days, and perhaps we believe that we no longer keep such boundaries in place. But what about just a few years ago, when a group of Sikhs wanted to build a place of worship in an abandoned temple in Toronto, and a group of well-meaning local citizens banded together and fought to prevent the redevelopment? Or what about the debate over Muslim women being allowed to wear the burka or niqab in public? Or the discussion in the Vatican to accept homosexuality? Or how the increase in Syrian refugees has also brought about a recent rise in Muslim phobia? And let’s not even begin to discuss the racist attitude towards the Mexican population that is coming from the US White House.

What is our view as Christians in these matters – do we look down with a superior attitude? Have we inherited the racist and sexist attitudes of our society? Or do we truly believe that *“Christ is all, and is in all”* (Colossians 3:11)?

Do we believe that:

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Are we willing to, *“show no favoritism”* and reach out to others regardless of their race, religion, sexual orientation, or any other category that we put people into?

I believe that this story and scripture today teaches us that there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. It teaches us today that boundaries can be broken down, however steeped in tradition they may be. It teaches us we just need to see others in the same light as ourselves. One of the children on Friday said “we just need to treat others how we want to be treated.” This story affirms for me that my God is a fair God that accepts everyone. I will leave you with a challenging thought from theologian Daniel Hays who writes:

“The gospel challenges each of us to do some serious soul searching on this issue. Do your attitudes and actions toward those who are ethnically different reflect the prejudiced culture that we inherited? Or do they reflect the new worldview of racial acceptance that the gospel proclaims and the Spirit empowers?”

This story that was told in the service today was based on Acts 10:1-48. In writing it, I have deliberately chosen to use the Yiddish words for Gentile (Goy) and Jewish (Idishe), to make the parallel to Peter (a Jew) going to Cornelius (a Gentile). I realize that my story has the Hunter (a Goy villager) going to the Elder (an Idische villager) but I have left it that way because it can prompt an interesting discussion about it does not matter which way we cross the cultural boundaries.

God has no favorites.

Once, many years ago, our elders speak of a land where there were two villages. One village was high in the mountains, and the other was deep in the valley.

The people that lived in the mountains were called the Goy people. They lived in houses made of square shaped caves; they wore furs from the animals they killed; they ate the meat from the beasts they hunted; they spoke the Goy language; celebrated Goy holy days and worshiped the Goy God.

Deep in the valley lived the Idische people. They lived in round houses made of straw and mud. They wore clothes made of cloth that they had carefully woven; they ate the crops that they grew; they spoke the Idische language; celebrated the Idische holy days and worshiped the idische God.

The two villages were very different, and although they lived side by side, they never mixed. In fact, there was a deep hatred of each other that went back many years and was passed down generation to generation. The children from the Goy village learned from their parents that the Idische people were to be despised. And the children from the Idische village learned from their parents never to trust the Goy people. And this was the way it was.

But one day, a hunter from the Goy people was caught in a terrible blinding sandstorm. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced. He frantically tried to find his way home, but the wind blew so strongly that he could not see where he was going, and soon he became disorientated and lost. He fell to his knees, covered himself in his furs for protection from the sand, and he prayed to his Goy God for guidance.

It was many hours later, in the darkness of the night, when the wind finally stopped blowing. The hunter emerged from under his furs, and looked around. He did not recognize where he was. He looked up and saw a ray of stars that seemed to point in a pathway. The hunter knew immediately that this must be an answer to his prayer and a sign from his Goy God. He followed the stars in the darkness of the night, and even though he felt that he was in unknown territory, he trusted his God. It wasn't until the morning sun began to rise, that he saw a village in the distance on the horizon. He did not recognize it, but could see that it was a gathering of small round houses made of straw and mud.

In the Idische village that night, as the people took cover from the sandstorm, many of them prayed to their Idische God for safety. One man, a wise elder of the village, unrolled his bedding chanting his prayers again and again. He could not sleep; he tossed and turned, until finally he fell into a deep sleep. And in his sleep, he dreamed. He saw a vision of a table laid with food and jugs full of wine. At the table sat a guest, a stranger, a man who did not speak his language, dress like him, or understand his customs.

When the elder awoke, as the sun was just rising, he knew he must immediately prepare the table for the guest.

It was just a few hours later when the hunter walked into the Idishe village. He knew that he was in the land that his parents had told him never to enter. He noticed that people stared at him from the doorways of their round houses, but he kept walking, believing that his God had sent him there. Then he noticed that a man, an elder, was walking towards him. They said nothing to each other. But when they met, the elder took the hunter's hands in his; he rested his cheek on both sides of the hunter's cheeks, first right, then left, and then he held his hands to his heart. The hunter, although he was not accustomed to this greeting, he understood straight away that it was a warm welcome, and that this was where his God meant for him to be. The elder took the hunter back to his hut. He washed the sand from the hunter's feet in a gesture of obedience. And the hunter, wanting to be an equal with his host rather than above, took the water and washed his host's feet too. Then they sat and ate. It was food that the hunter had been forbidden to eat by his parents, but again, he knew it was right. As they ate, they shared their stories. The hunter told of how his Goy God had guided him there with a path of stars, and the elder told of how his Idishe God had told him in a dream to prepare the welcome. They shared their customs, their laughter, their understanding of their gods, and when they had finished, they shared a blessing on each other. The hunter took the wine and marked the blessing symbol of his people on the forehead of his host, and the elder took his sacred necklace that he wore and placed it around the neck of the hunter. They both knew that this was a new beginning.

Later that day when the hunter arrived home in the Goy village, his family and friends ran to greet him. They threw their arms around him, believing that he had been lost forever. Then they noticed his necklace that he wore proudly around outside his furs, and they asked him about it. The hunter told them. He told them about the path of stars sent by his God, about the vision sent by the elders' God; he spoke of how he was welcomed and how he shared food and hospitality with the Idishe elder. The Goy people listened, some scorned him for entering the Idishe village, and many more argued that he should never have eaten their food. But the hunter shared the stories that he had heard from the elder, and as he did, the people softened. When he had finished speaking, the hunter stood up, and said to all that were gathered:

“Truly I have learned that our God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation.”

Many years have passed since this story. In our land today there are round and square houses side by side. Some people wear furs, some wear woven cloths, and some wear a mixture of the two. As people speak, you can still hear a trace of the two languages that once were spoken. As people eat, their tables are laid with food from all around the mountains and the valleys. And as people worship, they come together side by side in faith. Amen.