

“Walls and Welcome”
June 11, 2023

Nehemiah 2:11-18
Mark 9:38-41

June is Pride Month in our nation and everyone from the CIA to Bud Light are celebrating. This week is Pride Week in Iowa City, culminating in Pride Fest next Saturday. And, of course Congregational UCC will be a part of these celebrations—as we have been for what has to be over twenty years.

Let me begin this week, then, with a look back that might inform us as we move forward.

We were already a fixture at Pride Fest when I arrived sixteen years ago.

In 2008, the June flood canceled the event.

In 2009, the same year that Iowa legalized same-sex marriage, Pride was still just a small gathering in City Park. I think we might have been the only church with a table there that year.

In time Pride moved down to the Ped Mall and Raven and Courtney brought their new energy to our presence— there were now games and prizes.

Megan has a wonderful story about the time a few years ago when she and James went downtown with a poster that read: “God made you with love.” And then in rainbow letters beneath that, it announced: “FREE HUGS!” Megan’s plan was to take the sign to our church booth, where she would hug passers-by while she talked to them about the fact that, say, our denomination ordained our first openly-gay minister in 1972. They couldn’t find our booth, but they announced and brought the love of God to many that day.

During all of those years, we were never in the parade. In fact, Courtney once told me: “Don’t bother with the parade. It’s too short. It’s almost over before it starts.” Well, times change and *we* change and this year we’ll be in the parade. You can watch us or join us on the route and then visit our booth on the Ped Mall.

And this year we have a new banner as well.

Some of you will remember the old banner that was made for Pride Fest back in— what?—2012? It invitingly told people: “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here”—a great message of the hospitality and openness we had been showing for some time. When the new school year started a couple of months later, I climbed up a ladder and hung that banner outdoors on the Jefferson St. side of our church. Every day I could see students and others walking by and slowing down as they read the message announcing to each person that this was a place for all people.

That lasted a couple of weeks—and then the banner was torn down.

Our announcement of welcome was an unwelcome message to some.

Even so, we continue to be clear about who we are as God’s people on this corner. The authenticity and distinctiveness of this congregation is found in the open generosity that we see revealed in Jesus. This is the way that we seek to follow. Especially in this time of rebuilding, we draw on the power of that generous spirit—not only in June, but all year long.

We listen to the stories of faithful and not so faithful people recorded in scripture so that our lives as faithful and not so faithful people might be strengthened and sometimes even changed by the inclusion we encounter.

On first hearing, the stories about rebuilding the walls of a city some twenty-five hundred years ago and the mistaken notion of a disciple of Jesus seem to have little to do the life of this congregation in these days. As we enter more fully into these stories, however, they speak to us on a deeper level. They suggest new challenges and opportunities for how we understand ourselves as a congregation and as individuals.

Heard together, these two stories create a tension between a wall that will keep people out and the welcome that Jesus offers.

And, of course, it is tension that allows us to stand up and walk.

When Nehemiah accompanies the exiles back from Babylon, he finds the walls surrounding Jerusalem in ruin. Secretly inspecting the walls and the city by night, Nehemiah says to the people: “Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.” A wall would provide peace within the boundary of the city and security from without.

Yes, Robert Frost warned us: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” And he said: “Before I build a wall I’d ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out.”

Always good questions.

And yet, in his book, *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, Loren Mead reminds us that those ancient city walls distinguished what was inside the city from what was outside. It helped the city establish its identity.

There is something about the wall of a city that finds an organic parallel in the wall of a cell. Healthy cells are defined. They “know” what is part of the cell and what is not. A cancer cell, on the other hand, has no boundaries and respects no boundaries of other cells.

The task of rebuilding the wall to the city was a first step in restoring the health of the city.

This suggests that for us as a congregation we need to clarify what makes us, well, *us*. We must establish the authenticity and distinctiveness of this congregation so that we can live our faith visibly. Rebuilding the walls means clarifying the boundary of the community and continuing to maintain it. It involves getting clearer and clearer about what is inside and what is not inside the community.

Now, as a Congregational Church, that task is not so simple. Of course, who would think that anything in a Congregational Church would be simple?

As Congregationalists, we emphasize faith, freedom, and community.

In faith, we affirm that God is made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, whose way we seek to follow.

In freedom open ourselves to the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Life, moving among us. That freedom naturally attracts women and men of genuine conviction, of adventurous faith, and of gracious respect for each other's sincerity.

It also gets us into trouble.

We speak of the freedom we have as Congregationalists, but that leaves many with a sense of vagueness. "No one can tell us what to do" is hardly a definitive affirmation of faith or a helpful guide for living.

As a community, then, being aware of our boundaries might help. When the boundary between a congregation and the world outside is so blurred that we can no longer tell one from the other, our identity takes on the characteristics of the dominant society. The church then operates by society's standards without reference to our own story, heritage, and values, and the individual member has no community compass to determine true directions for life.

Paying attention to boundaries means rethinking what it is that makes us a special community. It means rediscovering and rehearsing the story of where we came from and whose we are. It means reconnecting with the power of our heritage—including the heritage that I rehearsed at the beginning of this sermon.

Where are our boundaries? What are our limits? How do we define who we are? How do we speak of faith, freedom, and community in ways that will mean something not only for adults today, but also for the youth that follow us tomorrow?

And how do we establish boundaries after we have heard that story of Jesus and John?

You know how it is.

In spite of the many times the Bible encourages the people of God to welcome strangers, we also have stories that show people taking just the opposite approach.

John comes running up to Jesus and proudly announces: “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and as he was not one of us, we tried to stop him.”

John didn’t even bother to find out his name. This unnamed “someone” was seeking to be faithful to the Jesus he had somehow come to know. And he comes up against that most difficult person—another follower of Jesus.

Whoever he was, this man John saw was the first “outsider.” He wasn’t following the established leadership of the community. And that was just too much for John to take.

The line had to be drawn somewhere—and this seemed to be a pretty good place.

So often in the church lines have been drawn in ways that exclude people.

If John had it his way, the followers of Jesus might have been limited to those twelve original disciples. After all, they knew one another. They were familiar faces. And Mark’s Gospel is clear that they all shared one more thing in common: each of those followers had a pretty good *misunderstanding* about who Jesus was and what he was about in this world.

The line has to be drawn somewhere—right?

Jesus draws a line. But as usual, he doesn’t draw it where we would expect.

“No one who performs a miracle in my name will be able the next moment to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is on our side.”

Hear that again: “Whoever is not against us is on our side.”

Jesus urges us toward graciousness and generosity.

Jesus draws a line. He establishes a new and appropriate border. We aren’t asked to remove all of our defenses, to be totally open to everyone and everything. Those who are “against us,” who would harm us, who would tear down or destroy the open and welcoming community that we seek to build should remain on the other side.

But while maintaining this border, we need to remember that those who aren’t against us are for us—and welcome them.

I think what is unpleasant about the image of walls and borders is that so often in the church lines have been drawn in ways that exclude people.

When we in the Congregational tradition and the United Church of Christ are at our best, we have often drawn the line in ways different from other churches.

In 1785 the all-white Congregational church in Torrington, CT, called Lemuel Haynes as their minister, making him the first African-American ordained in the United States.

In 1852, after graduating from Oberlin College and studying theology there, Antoinette Brown was ordained as minister of a Congregational Church in New York, making her the first American woman ordained into Christian ministry.

In 1972 the San Francisco Association of United Church of Christ ordained Bill Johnson, and we became the first denomination to ordain an openly gay person.

That is, as I said, when we are at our best. And we are not always at our best.

It is important for us to know who we are. We are powerless to change ourselves and the world for the better if we are uncertain about what our community stands for.

Let the lines we draw be clear.

Let them also be easily crossed by all.

In this way, we can continue to tell this city, the university, and all who will listen: no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.