

“Widening the Circle”  
August 1, 2021

Ezra 4:1-3  
Mark 9:38-41

These recent days have been an exercise in learning to let go of expectations, of learning to pivot quickly, of keeping going even when disappointed. It seems to me that much of the past year has been filled with such exercises. Things don't go as planned. Things don't go as we would like. New circumstances require new actions—or as the old hymn tells us, “New occasions teach new duties.”

It has always been difficult to keep up with the changes. That might be once reason why we have religions, why we seek to live by faith. When the ground shifts underneath our feet we look for something stable. When the way is uncertain, we seek companions for the uncertain journey.

Not that always get it right. In fact, one way in which scripture helps to inform and shape our lives is through the stories of faithful and not so faithful people who don't get it right themselves.

Take, for instance, the lessons we heard this morning. In spite of the many times the Bible encourages the people of God to welcome strangers and to work with others for the greater good, we keep stumbling across stories that show people taking just the opposite approach.

In our hope for returning to in-person worship in these still uncertain days, we've been reading from the Book of Ezra listening to what the story of those who returned to Jerusalem after exile in Babylon might say to us. The Bible, of course doesn't speak directly to our situation, so we need to listen carefully and creatively.

This is especially the case when we troubled by what we hear—and this morning's lesson is troubling.

A group of people—Ezra says that they were the “adversaries of Judah”—approach Zerubbabel and other leaders, asking if they can help in the rebuilding of the temple and the walls of the city. After all, for some time they, too, have been worshipping and sacrificing to the God of the Jewish people. “We want to work with you,” they say. “You know, reach across the aisle, show some bipartisanship with this new infrastructure project.”

That seems kind of refreshing, doesn't it? We could go along with that.

No dice, Zerubbabel replies. “You shall have no part with in building a house to our God.” We alone. We alone can do it. We alone will build.

See what I mean?

Troubling. On the surface this would be a call to us to close the doors and keep to ourselves. On the surface this seems to be a call to do everything on our own.

But, of course, we don't stay on the surface. We go deeper.

Let us, then, consider—briefly—the benefits of exclusivity, or perhaps we might say, the benefits of definition.

I want to be cautious here—and I don't want to push this analogy too far—but 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 seem to “know” what is a 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 temple and the walls were the first steps in restoring the health of the city. These acts would define the limits of the city. And one can easily imagine that those returning exiles, after their brutal experience, might be wary of those who offered help.

Returning and rebuilding involves getting clear about what makes this community healthy, what will let it thrive.

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

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

We seek to follow the God made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We seek to be open to the Spirit of God moving among us.

And we are wary—very wary—of formulations of that faith. No creed is binding upon the members of this church. This is not because creeds do not matter, but because sincerity of conviction requires full opportunity for intellectual freedom and personal experience. This inclusive basis of membership naturally attracts women and men of genuine conviction, of adventurous faith, and of gracious respect for each other's sincerity.

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?

Even among the followers of Jesus, we find people who are ready to draw the line and keep people out.

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.”

This man—whoever he was—was the first “outsider.” He wasn’t following the established leadership of the church. 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.

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. And they all had one thing in common: a pretty good misunderstanding about who Jesus was and what he was about.

These disciples—and many of their contemporary counterparts—seem to be afraid of strangers *simply because they are strangers—because they are not “one of us.”* New people see things differently, do things differently. Their hopes and fears may be different.

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.”

These two sentences urge graciousness and generosity of spirit upon us. And, we could add, they also seem to exonerate Zerubbabel and the others who wanted to exclude those who actually were *adversaries* from helping to restore the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus draws a line. He establishes a new and appropriate border. We aren’t asked to remove all of our defenses. Those who are “against us,” who would harm us, who would tear down or destroy 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.

“We tried to stop him because he was not following us.” A poor, 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—the follower of Jesus.

Can we draw the line in another way?

Edward Markham’s poem suggests another option:

He drew a circle to shut me out—  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in.

We live with a certain degree of tension in the church between the desire to be inclusive and the need for boundaries that define who we are.

It is important for us to know who we are. We are powerless to change ourselves and the world if we are confused about what our community stands for. A congregation needs walls that define what it is. Within our tradition, however, the wall, the boundary, is not for the purpose of separation but of service.

As Bill Maher said recently: “Most of human history is a horror story. But the good parts are about people coming together and sharing.” As we move into the uncertain days ahead, let’s continue to make some good history.

Let the line we draw be clear. Let those lines also help us to widen our circle, bringing more into our community.

Eternal God, we give you thanks that you call us into community. Strengthen our bonds with one another while we are apart so that when we are together we might be open to others in love. Amen.