

“A Humanity Without Walls”

OT 16B-18

2 Samuel 7: 1-14a

Ephesians 1: 3-14

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In the counseling world, therapists pay attention to quite a bit. They listen for both what is said and what isn't said. They look at one's seating positions, body language, and eye contact. They pay attention to silences, and who speaks first in family or group settings.

They also pay close attention to boundaries... both the counselors' boundaries with their clients; but especially to the boundaries their clients keep in their own lives. These include physical boundaries, certainly. Like where the client is from... physical boundaries of interaction and intimacy. But even more so, therapists are interested in emotional boundaries. Emotional boundaries that play a crucial role in defining one's emotional health.

Do you know what I mean by emotional boundaries?

When you get mad at someone, do you treat them poorly? Do you give them the silent treatment? Do you cut them off?

Or are you able to forgive fairly easily?

In your closer relationships, are you able to make yourself vulnerable? And if so, to whom?

Or, is vulnerability pretty hard for you? Do you lean into controlling what you can... sometimes even trying to control the people around you to limit your vulnerability?

Are you a people pleaser?

Or, on the flip-side, do you tend to defy rules and expectations?

These are just some of the issues regarding our emotional boundaries... boundaries that are vital to our health because they help each of us distinguish who we are... they help us define where I begin and you end... where I stand on any given issue versus where you stand... good or bad.

But it's not just individuals who carry these boundaries. As the Family-Systems Theory pioneer Murray Bowen has illustrated so well, families, communities, even churches have these boundary issues. And they've existed since the dawn of humanity.

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In fact, within our Old Testament lesson Lenore read for us, we see a boundary issue being worked out right before our eyes.

The young king David has just settled into his new royal house—a home befitting the new king of Israel. But as a faithful king who knows he's only king because of what God has done, David calls for the Hebrew prophet, Nathan, saying, “See here... I've got this great house filled with all this great stuff, while God is left out in the cold. You know what,” David tells

Nathan, “I’m gonna build the Lord a great temple where God will live and where all of Israel will come to worship.”

The prophet Nathan seems to like the idea. “Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.”

Seems like a done deal... right? King David decides to build God a temple... and the prophet Nathan says it’s a great idea... *except*... later that night, God comes to Nathan with a very different message. “I don’t want a temple,” God says. “How dare you or anyone else try to confine me to a physical space. I was with you in Egypt and swept over you at the Passover. I traveled with you throughout the Exodus journey. So why is it that you think you can now confine me to a house? Boundary me into a building? A temple.”

Ooops. King David had it wrong... and so did Nathan. “I am boundary-less,” says the Lord. “I am who I am... I will be who I will be... I will go where I will go,” God reminds them. “I am God, and you are mine; not that other way around. So don’t try to confine me—not to your buildings, and not to your expectations!”

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Now you’d think we’d have gotten this thing figured out since the days of ancient Israel. God doesn’t want to be confined to our boundaries... rather, we’re the ones who are called to live into God’s expectations.

But boy, how often we still get this wrong! Granted, we don’t try to build *physical* boundaries for God the way David planned. We believe God is everywhere, physically speaking.

But we do, very much so, in fact, we do try to construct emotional boundaries all around God... all the time.

It happens both out there... and in here.

It happens every time we assume God agrees with us... regardless of what Scripture might say or how Jesus’ law of love might apply.

So it happens every time we take a divisive issue and try to proclaim to one and all that God is on my side. That God sees things the same way I do and the one with whom I disagree simply must be wrong!

And it happens every time we look at a culture that is different than ours and label it as worse or less worthy than ours simply because we don’t understand its history, or its people, or its traditions.

Just as it happens every time we look at another person in this world and think they’re not as worthy of same care or respect as we are. As if God couldn’t love them every bit as much as God loves us.

So it happens every time we look at a criminal, a prostitute, a money launderer, a politician, an immigrant, a Muslim, what have you—and think we’re inherently better.

And it happens when we assume you should have to sing a hymn a certain way to fit in with God’s beloved... or that you have to wear nice clothes on a Sunday morning to be able to truly worship...

Truth be told, there’s an inordinately long list of boundaries we might try to build all around our version of who we’d like God to be... boundaries by which we try to define who we’d like God to love... and who we’d like God to condemn.

But to it all, God says, “Heck no.” The transformational kingdom Jesus came to reveal and that Ephesians so boldly proclaims is that, in Christ, there are no more aliens. In Christ, there are no more strangers. In Christ, none are to be excluded. For Christ, Ephesians says, Christ “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... He has made us all... one.”

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It’s a great line, isn’t it? “Christ has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

But it bears noting exactly who the author of Ephesians is writing about. Namely... Jews and the Greeks. Hebrews and Gentiles who absolutely *hated* each other. I mean they couldn’t stand each other... and for very understandable reasons.

For the Greeks, we must remember, were not of the chosen people Israel. The Greeks didn’t have an inherent claim to being part of God’s covenant community. That belonged solely to Israel. What’s more, Hebrew observance of the Torah had provided Israelites with a strong sense of national pride, even to the point of despising other nations as unenlightened and inferior—not as good as them. After all, the Greco-Roman world surrounding the Hebrews was one of religious pluralism. The Greeks worshipped multiple gods, and held what most Hebrews considered to be non-existent moral integrity. And to make matters worse, these Greeks were the ones in charge, able to subject Israel to Roman rule and laws. So let’s be clear, most Jews *hated* the Greeks!

But it’s not like the Greeks—or the Gentiles—loved the Hebrews. Rather, in the eyes of the Gentile, Greco-Roman world, the Hebrews were a strange, odd-ball people who clung to bizarre customs like circumcision and Sabbath observance and observed strange food laws that forbade things like eating pork. But possibly worst of all, the Greeks knew the Hebrews considered themselves superior... and who, in all honesty, likes it when anyone thinks they’re superior to you? To be sure, most Greeks *hated* the Jews.

It was easy to see this “dividing wall” Ephesians describes between the Gentiles and the Hebrews... a dividing wall built upon the emotional boundaries of hostility and pride. A dividing wall that both sides had helped create across centuries, and that both sides still desired!

And yet, it is to these newfound Greek and Jewish followers of Jesus that Ephesians says, “Christ is our peace; He’s made (us) into *one*. He’s broken down the dividing wall—once and forever!”

It’s a radical reminder, friends, that whenever we allow hostility to shape the way we view another... whenever we allow hostility to stand between ourselves and another group of people... whether it’s people of another socio-economic class, or ethnicity, orientation, or nationality... we are building the very dividing walls that Jesus came to tear down!

Just as every time we judge ourselves superior, every time we deny that the Spirit may be working in a voice or a position other than our own, we are working against what Christ came to accomplish.

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For what Christ came to accomplish, Ephesians says, is nothing less than the creation of a new humanity. A new humanity without walls. A new humanity without hostility. A new humanity where we stop trying to pigeon hole each other... and start tearing down the hostility between us and them... whoever they may be. Republican; Democrat; Jews; Muslims; Rich; Poor; Immigrants; people of color; the young; the old; the churched and the unchurched. Jesus doesn't stand for it, and neither should the church.

I mean, can you picture the witness that church in Ephesus gave to those who peered in through the windows. Can you imagine what people in Ephesus thought when they looked at that church and saw Jews and Greeks were worshipping together? Eating together? Being at peace with each other? Living in communion together? Can you imagine the impact that ancient church had on the community around them?

That, friends, is the new community we are called to practice here.

That, friends, is the new humanity we are called to help inaugurate out there. A humanity without walls. Amen.