Sunday, April 23, 1989
BORDERS: THEIR USE AND MISUSE
Matthew 9:9-13

A few months ago, while reading a novel, I came across a phrase that has stuck with me ever since. I've been rolling it around in my mind, examining its meaning and relationship to our Christian faith.

The phrase is this: "Nothing exists without its borders defined." Think about the meaning of those words. "Nothing exists without its borders defined." We human beings put borders or boundaries around things in life in an attempt to make some sense, to bring some order into this world. Or to say it another way: Borders or boundaries are structures or limits we impose on reality in our attempt to better understand and deal with the world around us.

Nothing exists without its borders defined. The State of Nebraska, for example, would not exist unless it had borders. The City of Lincoln has its city limits, so we know where it begins and where it ends. It would not be a city unless it had limits. Nations could not exist without borders. Our earth has its borders. Borders are what define an object or a piece of geography. Each one of us, as individuals, has our own borders. Each one of us came into being as a distinct human being when we were born. And the other border of our life on this earth is our death.

Another kind of border is your body. Your body defines you. Your name is a border for you. When we meet someone, one of the first questions we ask is, "What is your name?" Our name helps define us. Then someone may ask further, "Where do you live? What is your address?" That is another border that defines us. And yet none of these borders defines us completely. There are other larger borders that define us.

Thorton Wilder understood this and what it means when he gave the following as the address of one of his characters in the play Our Town:

"Jane Crofut; Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; The United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; The Earth; The Solar System; The Universe; The Mind of God."

Borders are both confining and yet necessary in some things. Each one of our five senses, for example, limits or puts a border around what our brain can receive. If your ears could receive all the sound waves around you, your mind couldn't handle all those at once. So our sense of hearing puts a border, sets limits on the sound waves that reach our brain for interpretation. I was watching a television documentary recently on elephants, and the researchers discovered that elephants make low, low sounds in communicating with each other, but the sounds are so low in frequency that our human ears cannot pick them up. Special machines had to be designed to monitor the sounds. So now we know that elephants make sounds, but we can't hear them.

In a similar way, our eyes cannot see all there is to see around us. Our sense of sight puts borders or limitations around what light waves reach our brain. If we could see everything, it would be too much, and we wouldn't be able to sort it all out. The same goes for our sense of taste, touch, and smell. We all know that dogs can smell things we cannot smell, and I assume that we can smell things that dogs cannot smell, and that we can hear things that elephants

cannot hear. Thus, we are so constructed that there are borders or limitations that our senses have so that we can make some sense out of what is around us.

The problem is that sometimes we come to believe that if we cannot see, hear, taste, touch, or smell something, it does not exist. Or to put it another way, we human beings like to think that we know the whole truth simply by experiencing the environment around us through our senses.

Years ago, G. K. Chesterton defined a heretic in this way: “A heretic is not a man who denies the truth, but a man who knows part of the truth and thinks it is the whole truth.” Borders help us to know part of the truth, but what we put within the borders is never all the truth.

“Nothing exists without its borders defined.” Perhaps a better way to say it is — nothing exists for us as human beings until we put a frame around it so that we can begin to try to understand it. Since we cannot comprehend everything around us at once, we put things in frames. Picture a reel of motion picture film on a projector. We cannot see the whole movie at once, but only frame by frame.

First of all, let’s recognize the importance of borders, or boundaries, or limits in our life together. I have already noted the necessity of the limits of our five senses. But it goes much further than that.

In sports, for example, we need borders or boundaries. We have lines on the football field or tennis court or golf course, or basketball or soccer or volleyball, which indicate “out of bounds,” or in baseball a foul ball, or if it’s over the fence, a home run. Without the borders, the games could not exist. The rules in sports and games are also borders. “Three strikes and you’re out,” from baseball is but one example.

Laws that are adopted by people for governing themselves are borders. They place limits on our behavior. We could not live together without some rules to govern us. What these rules should be and how they are to be applied and interpreted is always open to debate. And there are times, of course, when the rules, the borders, need to be changed.

And even beyond that, borders or limits are important. If you could live without limits, if you could do anything, go anywhere, command anyone to do what you wanted, would that make you happy? Would you be able to use all that power in ways that would give your life enduring significance and satisfaction?

One of the classics in literature, Faust, is the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil so that he can live a life without limits and experience everything. He wants to read all the books, speak all the languages, and taste all the pleasures. He wants to be like God, going beyond human limitations. So the devil gives him everything — wealth, political power, the ability to travel anywhere, and to be loved by any woman he desires. Faust does it all, and he is still not happy. However much wealth he acquires, however many women he seduces, there is an unsatisfied hunger within him.

By the time we come to the end of the play, Faust has aged. Instead of winning fights and attracting young women, Faust is now at work building dikes to reclaim land from the sea for people to live and work on. Instead of trying to be like God, a God of power, seeing and controlling without limits, he has now become like God, a God of creation, separating the water from drying land, planting gardens, and setting people to work in them. Now, for the first time,

Faust can say, “Let this moment linger, it is so good.” He has discovered that much of creation is about creating borders. Every garden has its borders, which set it off from its surroundings. The creativity of God has a lot to do with creating borders according to the story in Genesis: God brings form and structure out of chaos.

So it is that borders in life are useful. Nothing exists without its borders defined.

But borders can also be misunderstood and misused. There is always the temptation to make a border into an impenetrable wall or fence. We put a wall around an idea and then refuse to see how it connects to other ideas. Or we build a wall around an idea or doctrine to protect it so that it cannot be questioned. We also use borders to separate people from people. We say, “He’s Jewish,” or “She’s Black,” or “He’s Russian.” The problem is when they become borders we are afraid to cross. Think of the many walls of segregation we have used throughout history (and still use) to falsely separate people.

Most of the labels we use to categorize others are ways of putting a border around that person or group and separating them from us. We say, “She’s a hippy,” or “He’s a radical,” or “She’s a right-wing fanatic,” or “He’s a sinner.” Each human being is much more than that narrow label we apply, and it becomes a border that is too small and is false.

Most borders, when they are made into walls, whether they be racial, ethnic, theological, moral, or political, are used by the border-makers or wall-builders as a way of separating the good from the bad, the right from the wrong, the saved from the unsaved. Do the wall-builders ever place themselves on the side of the bad or the wrong? Or is it the self-righteous who do most of the wall building?

Jesus was forever questioning borders and boundaries and crossing them. And He invites us to cross these borders along with Him. The story we read earlier from Matthew’s gospel is only one example of many in the New Testament stories about how He crossed borders that had been made into walls.

In this story from the 9th chapter of Matthew, Jesus had gone into the house of a tax collector, a man considered by the righteous people to be a sinner, and there were many other unsaved sinful people there as well. Jesus sat at the table and ate with them. He crossed the border that had been made into a wall and was severely criticized for it.

The teachings and life of Jesus lead to a way of life that crosses boundaries and breaks down dividing walls of hostility. Jesus refused to recognize those markers that pointed to the righteousness inherent in oneself or one’s subculture, or one racial or ethnic group. Jesus knew that many of the borders we create tend to serve our heroic, and often tragic, projects of self-justification.

Or to put it another way, Jesus was forever calling people to enlarge the borders they put around others. Jesus did not only go into the home of a sinner. He also went into the home of a human being, the home of a child of God, the home of an individual loved by God. By His actions, He redefined the borders — making them larger and more inclusive.

Jesus was also not afraid to question the borders made into walls that are built around ideas or doctrines. Thus, when He healed a man on the Sabbath and was criticized for it, because His critics said He broke the Sabbath law about doing no work on the Sabbath, He reminded them that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not us for the Sabbath. In other words, the

border defining the Sabbath was too narrow. It needed to be re-framed. And that's what He did.

Jesus knew that many of the labels we put onto God are too limited, which is to say the borders are too confining and need to be stretched. Although God is infinite, in our attempt to comprehend God, we necessarily use borders. The word "God" is one such border. The metaphors we use are other kinds of borders: Father, Mother, Lord, Creator.

Nothing exists without its borders defined. What we need to remember is that borders are just that — only borders. They can be made smaller or larger. They can be changed or moved.

In our world today, sometimes called a "global village," many of the old borders no longer make much sense.

What are some of the borders that define your life? Do they need to be enlarged? What are some of the borders you find yourself putting around other people? Are they large enough to truly know that person? What about the borders you have put around your dreams? Are they large enough? What are the borders you put around God? Do they need to be changed?

The good news is that God crosses all the borders we put around people and the creation. God does not pay attention to the borders we often create. Amen.