Sunday, October 15, 1995
COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES
Luke 17:11-15

Several weeks ago, the sermon was titled Where Do You Draw the Line? Today, I want to continue with that metaphor of lines or boundaries.

We're all familiar with the phrase "coloring outside the lines," probably because when we were children learning to use crayons, we tried as much as possible to color inside the lines and maybe even were criticized when we colored outside them.

As I said in the previous sermon, lines or boundaries are important. We could not live well — or maybe not at all — without them. As far as our human consciousness is concerned, nothing exists without its borders defined. We human beings put borders or boundaries around things in life to make sense of them and to bring some order to our lives. To put it another way, borders or boundaries are structures or limits that help us define things so that we can better understand and deal with them. Nations could not exist without borders. The earth itself is defined by its borders — this large, round ball that follows a path around the sun.

Your physical body is what defines you as an individual. Your name is a border. Someone might ask you, "Where do you live? What is your address?" That is another border that defines you so that you can be located.

Borders are confining, yet necessary. Each of our five senses, for example, limits or puts a border around what our brain receives and interprets. If your ears could receive all the sound waves around you, your mind couldn't handle them all 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 when communicating with each other — so low that our human ears cannot pick them up. Special machines have been designed to monitor the sounds. So now we know that elephants make sounds and talk with each other, but we cannot hear them with the human ear.

Maybe there are all sorts of communications going on between animals that we don't know about because our senses aren't able to perceive them. We know that the sense of smell in some breeds of dogs is much more acute than ours. They can pick up trails that are unknown to us.

To use the metaphor of lines or boundaries in another way, consider how important boundaries are for sports events. A football field would not be a football field without the lines. "You're out of bounds" is a phrase often heard in sports events. Or in baseball, the umpire shouts, "Foul ball," meaning it is outside the base lines.

We also use the phrase "You're out of bounds" to describe behavior that we consider unacceptable. That's important because we humans need guidelines and rules; otherwise, life would be even more chaotic than it is.

It's the same with coloring inside the lines, or at least near them. Without lines, there would be no picture.

But wouldn't we all agree that sometimes in life, lines can become too rigid, too fixed, and that some boundaries need to be challenged because they are based on the wrong assumptions? Not too many years ago, when public restrooms, eating places, water fountains, and schools were desegregated, lines that had previously been drawn were changed. It took many brave and courageous people willing to color outside the lines to make that happen.

So there is always tension between those who never want to color outside the lines and those that do. Another phrase we use to describe the crossing of lines is "cutting edge." The cutting edge occurs when margins are challenged. People who are happy to stay in the middle may take the terror out of life, but they also smother innovation. Almost every step of progress that has benefited the human race happened because someone or a group was willing to color outside the lines.

Jesus knew how important lines and borders are in our lives, individually and in society at large, and he also knew that sometimes the lines have to be crossed or challenged. Jesus not only told stories about coloring outside the lines, but he did it as well.

Remember the story he told about the Good Samaritan? He told that story to an audience made up of people who sincerely believed they were the chosen ones of God and that Samaritans could do no good — that God had banished them to hell. Yet in the story, the Samaritan had the courage to color outside the lines. He broke a rule that was ironclad in his time: that Samaritans and Jews were to have nothing to do with each other. What makes that story even more significant is that the people we would've expected to be the most religious, and therefore caring and helpful — namely the priest and the Levite — passed by the injured man in the ditch, while the "irreligious" Samaritan practiced the love of God toward his neighbor.

The story this morning from the Gospel of Luke carries the same theme. Jesus was met by ten lepers as he entered a village, and they wanted his help. It's hard for us today to imagine the scene. Lepers in Jesus' day, and for long afterward, were believed to be highly contagious, were called unclean, and were required to live beyond regular human communities. They depended upon charity for their sustenance while their disease, untreated, ravaged their bodies and disfigured their faces.

The small group of lepers that confronted Jesus that day would've been ragged, disfigured, undernourished, and not pretty to behold. Everyone else would've been horrified. In their extremity, they called out to Jesus for healing. Jesus was willing to color outside the lines and responded to their request.

It's revealing in the gospels how often those who lay claim to Jesus' power are in extremity — ill, cast out, rejected, lonely, misunderstood, powerless. Many people today who reach out to Jesus do so for the same reasons.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus had mercy on them. He did not reject them but accepted them as children of God and told them to go show themselves to the priests. And as they went, they were healed.

Why did Jesus send them to the priests? According to the religious rules of that day, the priests were empowered to decide who was a leper and who was not. It was up to them to determine whether a leper who claimed to be healed of the disease was truly healed and could return to normal society.

Now the story takes an unusual turn. “Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and he fell on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks.” And here’s the punchline, the most important sentence in the story: “Now he was a Samaritan.”

Frequently, this story from Luke’s gospel is used as a text for Thanksgiving sermons, and the preacher talks about the ungrateful nine who did not return to give thanks. But the main point Luke wants to make with the story is that the individual least expected to praise God and give thanks is the one who did so. Cleansed of one stigma, he still bore another. He was a double outcast — a Samaritan and a leper. Why is it that so often the people who live on the fringes of life find it easier to praise God and give thanks than those who are unquestioned members of society?

The Samaritan was the least expected to be thankful and to praise God because Samaritans were thought to hold the wrong kind of religious faith. They were considered outside of God’s love and care. They were way out of bounds.

In the story, Jesus playfully asks the Samaritan, “Where are the other nine?” It’s obvious where the nine are. They are doing what Jesus told them to do. They are literalists, God love them; they are doing their duty. They would never be caught coloring outside the lines. They have taken the road as commanded, found themselves healed along the way, and are eager to have the priests certify them as cured with all of their membership privileges reinstated.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, knew that even if he were to be certified by the priests as “clean” and free of leprosy, he would still be an outcast to many. So he followed his heart instead of the instructions. Deep down, I think he knew that God’s love also colors outside the lines and does not divide human beings into opposing groups as we do.

Isn’t it ironic that as long as the ten were united in their misery, it apparently made no difference who was a Jew and who was a Samaritan; they lived together as lepers. Now that they were healed, the old distinctions emerged again.

Luke implies that the other nine were Jews, and after they were all healed, they would have nothing to do with that Samaritan or any other Samaritans. While they were in their misery, they would eat together and travel together without any distinctions, but now that they were healed, they would not have allowed themselves to sit at the same table with the Samaritan. Isn’t the same true for us, no matter our religious tradition?

Isn’t it strange that in misery, illness, or tragedy, we humans can live and work together without making the usual artificial distinctions? In those circumstances, we are united and aware of our interdependence. Then we are bold enough to color outside the lines. But when we come into prosperity, we begin to make distinctions again, and we separate ourselves from others. We only color inside the lines.

Note another truth this story underscores. The Samaritan was the least expected. And here is the truth that is most revealing: it is so often the stranger, the visitor, the outsider, the outcast, the one considered to be irreligious, who sees, hears, enjoys, and responds in gratitude to the countless gifts we take for granted.

The visitor in the home plays with the children whom the parents had hardly noticed between reading the evening paper or watching the news on television. The visitor gives thanks to the one who prepared the meal, which others have eaten in silence a thousand times. The visitor is shown places in our community that we ourselves are truly seeing for the first time.

So this is more than a story about healing and more than a story about being thankful or unthankful. It is above all a story about the unconditional love of God — a love that colors outside the lines we draw too tightly. This love of God has nothing to do with how lovable we are. It is gracious to the creation God brought into being, even when that creation pays little attention.

The people at home reading the newspaper this morning, or who stayed in bed and never even thought of coming to church and offering thanks, will pass the day in as much safety as we will. Does that upset you?

Would it make you feel better if you knew that being here would bring you some reward that those at home with the newspaper, rake, or a few extra hours of sleep are missing out on? Yet God goes on showering grace on the world and on you and me regardless, sustaining those who cannot or will not believe and those who will not worship or give thanks. As Jesus said, “God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

But there is nevertheless a difference. When Jesus said to the healed Samaritan leper, “Your faith has made you well,” he meant that a deeper healing had also taken place in that individual. The one leper who returned to give thanks and praise God was not only healed of his leprosy but also knew how he had been healed and where his healing had come from. And so he felt more than the self-centered elation of the other nine. He felt gratitude. He experienced that sense of happiness and wholeness that overflows into praise.

Isn’t that the lesson for faith in this story? It’s not that people of faith are any better than others or that they deserve or receive special treatment from God. It’s that the people who praise God like the Samaritan understand how the world really works. They understand the source of all goodness and wholeness is God — a God who frequently colors outside the lines we draw and calls on us to not be afraid to do the same when necessary. And that makes all the difference. Amen.