Book 31

Sunday October 15, 1995

COLORING OUTSIDE THE LINES Luke 17:11-15

Several weeks ago, the sermon had the title, WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE? Today I'm going 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 and were learning to use color crayons we tried as much as possible to color inside the lines and maybe even were criticized when we colored outside the lines.

As I said in the previous sermon, lines or bound-

aries are important. We could not live very 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 in an attempt to make some sense, to bring some order into our lives. Or to say it in another way: borders or boundaries are structures or limits which help us to define things so that we are better able to 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 which defines

you so that you can be located.

Borders are confining and yet necessary. Each one 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 in communicating with each other, but the sounds are so low in frequency 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 in that way talk with

each other, but we cannot hear them with the human ear.

Maybe there are all sorts of communications going on between animals and because our senses are not able to be conscious of them, we don't know they exist. We all know that the sense of smell in some breeds of dogs is much more acute than the human sense of smell. They can pick up trails that are not known 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 human behavior that we consider unacceptable. And that's important because human beings need guidelines and rules otherwise life would be even more chaotic that 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 who were willing to color outside the lines in order to make that happen.

So there is always a 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 been taken which has benefited the human race is because someone or a group has been 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 there are times when 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 that they, and they only, were the chosen of God and that Samaritans could do no good; that God had banished them to hell. Yet in the story, as Jesus told it, the Samaritan had the courage to color outside the lines. He broke a rule that was iron--clad in his time--that Samaritans and Jews were to have nothing at all 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

man in the ditch who was injured and in need of help and it was the "irreligious" Samaritan who practiced the love of God to 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 is 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 they 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, un-

dernourished 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 line and responded to their request.

It's revealing in the gospels to note 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, that is 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 healed and therefore 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 punch line, 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 goes on to talk about the ungrateful nine

who did not return to give thanks. But the main point that Luke wants to make with the story is that the individual least expected to be praising God and giving thanks is the one who did so. Cleansed of one stigma, he still bears 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 with unquestioned members

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

In the story, Jesus in a playful kind of way asks

the Samaritan, "Where are the other nine?" It's perfectly obvious where the nine are. The nine 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 being 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 being "clean," free of leprosy, he would still be an outcast to many. So he followed his heart instead of the instructions. I think he knew deep down that God's love also colors outside the lines and does not divide human beings into

opposing groups in the same way as we do.

And isn't it ironic that so 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 with the telling of this story that the other nine were Jews, and after they were all healed would have nothing to do with that Samaritan or any other Samaritans for that matter. While they were in their misery, they would eat together, travel together without any distinctions, but now that they were healed, the nine would not have allowed themselves to sit at the same table with the Samaritan. But isn't the same also true for us no matter what our religious tradition?

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

Note another truth which the story underscores. The Samaritan was the least expected. 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 for the countless gifts which are ours today but for which

familiarity has made us unable to appreciate.

The visitor in the home plays with the children which the parents had hardly noticed between coming home and reading the evening paper or watching the news on television. The visitor gives thanks to the one who has prepared the meal which others of us have eaten a thousand times in silence. The visitor is shown places in our community which 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 not being thankful. It is above all a story about the unconditional love of God, the love of God which colors outside the lines we like to draw too tightly. This love of God has nothing to do with how

lovable we are. This love of God is gracious to the creation that God brought into being even when that creations 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. 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 or rake or a few extra hours 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 the people of faith are any better than other people, or that people of faith deserve or receive special treatment from God? It's that the people who praise God like the Samaritan understand how the world really works, understand what the source of all goodness and wholeness is. It is God who frequently colors outside the lines that we draw and that same God calls on us to not be afraid when necessary to color outside the lines. And that makes all the difference. Amen.