Sunday, September 27, 1998
BOUNDARIES OR CHASMS
Luke 16:19-31

There's an old saying that goes, "Nothing exists without its boundaries defined." We human beings put boundaries around things in life in order to create their identity. The State of Nebraska would not exist unless it had boundaries. The City of Lincoln has its city limits, so we know where it begins and ends. The boundaries we establish are what give definition to what we know.

Boundaries give us a sense of place as well as identity. For example, my birth certificate tells the name of the town where I was born. When you meet someone new, you usually ask, "Where are you from?" If there were no boundaries, the person would have to answer, "From nowhere," or "From everywhere."

Your human body has its boundaries. It defines you. Your name is also a boundary. It too identifies you as a distinct human being. All the time, we use boundaries to tell ourselves and others who we are. You might say, for example, "I am African American," or "I'm European American," or "I'm a conservative," or "I'm Catholic," or "I'm Baptist."

We establish other boundaries around ourselves. You might sense if someone gets too close to you physically that they are invading your space, even though the person is not touching you. All of us establish boundaries of one kind or another.

Each one of our five senses also limits or puts a boundary around what our brain can receive. If your ear could receive all the sound waves around you, your mind couldn't handle all those at once. So our sense of hearing puts a boundary around what sound waves reach our brain. The same goes for our sense of touch, taste, smell, and sight. Dogs can smell things that we humans cannot, and we can smell things that dogs cannot.

To live in reasonable peacefulness with one another, it is necessary to also establish moral and legal boundaries that hopefully guide our conduct. They place limits on our behavior for the good of the community as a whole. That's why the Bible teaches that bad government is preferable to no government at all. We human beings cannot long survive in a state of anarchy and chaos. Rules such as the Ten Commandments give us boundaries for our conduct.

Games and sporting events could not exist without boundaries and rules. We have lines that indicate what is out of bounds on the football field, tennis court, golf course, soccer field, and in baseball. A home run in baseball happens when the batter hits the ball out of the playing field, but it has to be within the foul lines, the baseline boundaries. Without these boundaries, the games could not be played. The rules that govern the sports events are also boundaries, and we need referees and umpires to interpret and enforce the rules. Otherwise, it would be chaos.

So, boundaries are important and necessary in life. However, some boundaries, if over-emphasized and never questioned or crossed, can become chasms — insurmountable barriers that can be harmful and destructive.

For example, we can draw a line or put a wall around an idea or doctrine and refuse to question it or test its validity. When slavery was legal in this country, it was justified by many on the premise that Black people from Africa were not fully human and thus were destined to be

slaves. The boundary around that belief had to be crossed. For some, it became a chasm that could not be bridged, and we are still living with the consequences of that false assumption.

We can also use boundaries to separate people from one another rather than connect them. We say, “He’s Jewish,” or “She’s Muslim,” or “I’m rich and you’re poor,” or “You’re conservative and he’s liberal.” We put people into rigid categories and refuse to cross the boundaries to see how we might connect in ways that transcend these limiting boundaries.

The power and beauty of the life and teachings of Jesus is that he recognized the need for boundaries in life but at the same time knew that there are some boundaries that need to be questioned, crossed, enlarged, or in some cases eliminated.

In the New Testament stories, we discover that Jesus was forever questioning some of the boundaries of his time and crossing them. Inevitably, he was criticized by some who wanted to keep the boundaries rigid.

When he went into the house of a tax collector and ate at his table, he crossed a boundary that for many had become a chasm they would not cross. Jesus didn’t always eliminate the boundaries of his time but rather enlarged them. He redefined the tax collector as a human being, a child of God, and therefore as a brother and as someone he could eat with.

“Beware lest boundaries become chasms” is one of the main themes of the parable that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus, the story you heard earlier as the scripture reading.

The story begins, “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.”

In beginning the story this way, Jesus was not condemning the rich man for his wealth but simply stating a fact. Some people are rich, others are not.

Life is filled with differences. There are the healthy and the sick. There are the intelligent and the not-so-intelligent, the lucky and the unlucky, the tall and the short, Catholics and Protestants, Jews, Gentiles, and Muslims. It is strongly suggested in this story, however, that if one’s whole life is absorbed in his or her wealth, that person is likely to be insulated from the rest of society. The riches can be a boundary that grows into a chasm.

The rich man allowed his wealth to create a barrier between him and others, especially those who were poor. He was not cruel or callous, but indifferent. He was not consciously aware of the poor man, Lazarus, who lived next to the gate of the fence that surrounded his estate and who tried to satisfy his hunger with the leftovers from the rich man’s table. The rich man did not see that he had any connection with this poor man at all. The boundary had become a chasm.

But there’s one event that comes to all of us, no matter what our differences are in this life. The rich man and Lazarus died. The same end comes to every person — rich or poor, healthy or sick, lucky or unlucky, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim, or unbeliever.

Now the tables are turned. Lazarus, the poor man, was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. That was Jesus’ way of saying that he was in paradise. His suffering was over, and he was completely with God. The rich man, to his utter amazement, found himself a long way off. He was in torment. He was in hell. His agony was made worse by the fact that now, for the first

time, he sees paradise. He is aware of God, and now he can even see Lazarus, the one he ignored before.

To be able to see paradise and know that you are separated from it is to be in hell. To put it another way, to be in hell is to be utterly separated from God and others but in such a way that you are compelled to see that, like a thirsty person seeing a spring of water from which they cannot drink. To be in hell is to be able to see the glory of God but have no access to it.

In this life, we are frequently able to hide ourselves from our true condition and the condition of others by creating boundaries. But there comes a time when all we have hidden is revealed. As Mickey Mantle said before he died, “If I had known I was going to live so long, I would have taken better care of myself.”

The rich man in death and in hell is now aware of much that he refused to see before. According to the story, he called out to Abraham in the distance, “Father Abraham, please, I need a drink of water. And if you can’t come, then send Lazarus over to dip his finger in water and at least cool my tongue.”

The rich man still doesn’t get it. He’s still trying to order people around. He’s telling Abraham who his true son ought to be. “Come on, Father Abraham, I’m the one who is supposed to be blessed around here, not that poor man Lazarus.”

But Abraham answered, “Son, you don’t seem to have gotten the message yet. Lazarus isn’t running any errands for you. In fact, even if he wanted to, he couldn’t. A great chasm now exists between him and you, and it cannot be crossed in either direction.”

The rich man couldn’t believe it. In this life, his money had been able to get him anything he wanted. “It’s not fair,” he said. “Nobody told me. I wasn’t warned. At least then send Lazarus back to my former life to warn my brothers so they won’t end up here in the same condition as I am, in this place of torment.”

But Father Abraham replied, “They have already been told but haven’t paid any attention. The truth from God was there all the time. And if your brothers aren’t getting the message from God all along, they will not be convinced if someone should return from the dead and warn them. The boundary that you set up, which kept you from seeing Lazarus in his misery, has now formed into a chasm that cannot be bridged.”

The story makes two main points for us in this life, here and now.

The first is a warning about boundaries. As I noted earlier, in some parts of our living, boundaries are necessary and helpful. But in other parts, the boundaries we create can become chasms that separate us more and more from each other. There are times when the chasm becomes so wide and permanent that it can no longer be crossed.

In The Measure of Our Success, a book published in 1992 by Marian Wright Edelman, one of the 25 lessons for life she gives to her children is: “Remember, and help America remember, that the fellowship of human beings is more important than the fellowship of race and class and gender.”

She is telling her children to expand their boundaries so that they are more inclusive than exclusive. That’s the way to avoid chasms.

There are so many chasms being created and made wider and deeper in our time. Let me be personal. I cannot speak for what goes on inside you, but I do know that for me there are unusual lifestyles, categories of problems, types of people, social or cultural groups that in subtle, rationalized ways get the chasm treatment. A gap, a distance begins to form between me and them. I don't want to see them. I walk on the other side of the street. I don't want to admit that they exist.

And then I remember this story that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus, and I warn myself — beware lest your boundary become a chasm.

We need always to be questioning the boundaries we draw as to whether they are necessary and valid, or do they need to be crossed? If you choose to live an insulated, isolated life — if you choose to live in your own little private and protected world — if you live without compassion and generosity, you begin to make a boundary into a chasm, a chasm between yourself and others, and between yourself and God.

The second point of this story is that we cannot use the excuse the rich man tried to use — that he hadn't been warned. God is giving us signals all the time. There will be no special messenger coming back from the dead to warn us. Even if such a special messenger did come, we wouldn't pay any more attention anyway.

Jesus had three key words in his ministry. I call them the "L" words: the last, the least, and the lost. He said, "The last shall be first, the least shall be the greatest, and the lost shall be found." The descendants of Lazarus are all around us. Many times, they don't fit into the standards of income, color, class, ethnic group, or social customs. They do not need a handout so much as a handclasp.

Here's a story from another church. It was located in a university city like Lincoln. This congregation began an extensive program to attract more people, especially students from the university, to its worship services.

As a result, one Palm Sunday, when the church was filled to capacity, with the regular members all dressed in their Sunday best, a young man appeared, dressed in a sweatshirt, blue jeans, thick socks, and sandals. He was late and couldn't find a seat. So he walked all the way down to the front of the sanctuary and sat cross-legged on the floor.

As the congregation watched and held their breath, an old, very distinguished gentleman who was a long-time member of the congregation made his way down the aisle. He carried an Order of Worship, a hymnal, as well as his cane. Was he going to reprimand the visitor? When he reached the place where the young man was sitting on the floor, slowly and carefully, with the aid of his cane, he lowered himself to the floor to sit next to the young man. Amen.