Sunday, October 10, 2004
INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THE LINES
Luke 17:11-19

You're familiar with the phrase, "coloring outside the lines." Maybe when you were a child and learning to use color crayons or small watercolor paintbrushes, you did your best to color inside the lines. It's even possible that you were criticized if you were careless and colored too much outside the lines.

Lines or boundaries are important in life. It's necessary to put borders or boundaries around things in order to define and understand them. Towns, cities, states, and nations could not exist without boundaries. Your physical body defines you as an individual. Your name is a kind of border. Where you live is within specific boundaries. It's not unusual to ask someone, "Where do you live? What is your address?" The answer tells them where they can locate you.

Boundaries are necessary and limiting at the same time. Each one of your five senses, for example, limits or puts a boundary around what your brain receives and interprets. If your ears could hear and send to your brain all the sound waves around you, your mind could not handle them all at once. So your sense of hearing has limits.

I watched a television documentary on elephants. Researchers have discovered that elephants make low, very low sounds in communicating with each other. The sounds are so low in frequency that human ears cannot pick them up. Special machines have been designed to monitor the sounds. So now it is known that elephants make these very low sounds and in that way communicate with each other.

It's possible that there are all sorts of communications going on between animals, and because human senses are not able to experience them, you don't know they exist. It is well known that the sense of smell in some breeds of dogs is much more acute than the human sense of smell.

Boundaries are important in athletic events. A football field would not be a football field without the lines. "You're out of bounds" is a phrase commonly used in athletic events. In baseball, the infield base lines and their extensions designate whether a ball that is hit is a fair ball or a foul ball.

You also have used the phrase, "You're out of bounds," or "You're out of line," to describe human behavior that is considered unacceptable. All human beings need guidelines and rules, boundaries and borders. Otherwise, life would be more chaotic than it is. It's the same with coloring inside or outside the lines. Without lines, there would be no picture.

But wouldn't you also agree that sometimes in life, lines and boundaries can become too rigid, too fixed? Some lines need to be crossed. Some boundaries need to be eliminated. Some fences and walls need to be torn down. President Reagan was right on target when he said to the Soviet President, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall." There are always walls that need to be torn down.

Not too many years ago, when public restrooms, eating places, movie theaters, water fountains, and public schools were desegregated, lines that had previously been drawn were crossed and eliminated. It took many courageous people who were willing to color outside the lines to make that happen.

So there is always a tension between lines that are necessary and lines that need to be crossed and eliminated. Progress for the better has most often taken place in human affairs when unnecessary or unjust lines have been crossed and/or eliminated; when harmful walls have been torn down.

Jesus knew how important lines and boundaries can be in individual lives and in society at large. He also knew that there are times when some of these lines have to be called into question, crossed, and/or eliminated. He did that in the way he lived and related to people, and many of his parables have this theme.

You remember the story of 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 — that God had drawn a line around them that they should not cross and that others who were different from them should not cross. The Samaritans were not included in this circle. They were to have no relationships with Jews, and Jews were to have no relationship with them. Yet, in the story as Jesus told it, the Samaritan had the courage to cross the line. He broke a rule that was iron-clad in his time. 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 you would've expected to be the most religious, and therefore caring and helpful, namely the priest and Levite, passed by on the other side and would not even help one of their own. They completely ignored the injured man in the ditch. They were afraid of crossing another line that said if you touched a person who was dead, you made yourself impure. It was the Samaritan who showed compassion and colored outside the line.

The story today from the gospel of Luke has the same theme. Jesus was met by ten lepers as he entered a village, and they wanted his help. It's difficult for people today to imagine the scene. Lepers in that day, and for many years after, were believed to be highly contagious. They were called "unclean" and were required to live outside regular human communities.

The small group of lepers that confronted Jesus that day would've been ragged and disfigured. They called out to Jesus for healing. He was willing to go outside the line that society had created and responded positively to their request.

It's revealing in the Bible stories to note how often those who asked for help from Jesus were those who were outcasts in the eyes of others. Jesus accepted the 10 lepers as human beings created by God in God's image. He did not reject them. So that they could be certified as being healed, he told them to go show themselves 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 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 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 goes on to talk about the ungrateful nine lepers 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 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. The story reminds you that it is often the people who live on the fringes of life and seem to have the least for which to be thankful who are the most thankful.

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 God's love and care. They were out of bounds.

In the story, Jesus, in a playful kind of way, asks the Samaritan, "Where are the other nine?" It's a rhetorical question. The other nine are doing what Jesus told them to do. They have gone to the priests to be certified as cleansed of their disease. They would never be caught coloring outside the lines. The Samaritan, on the other hand, knew that even if he were to be certified by the priests as being free of leprosy, he would still be an outcast to many. He followed his heart. I think he knew that God's love also colors outside the lines and does not divide human beings into acceptable and unacceptable people as we tend to do.

And isn't it ironic that so long as the ten all had leprosy, it apparently made no difference who was a Jew and who was a Samaritan? They were united in their misery. They lived together as lepers. Now that they were healed, the old artificial distinctions emerged again.

Luke implies in the telling of this story that the other nine were Jews, and after they were all healed, they would have nothing to do with that Samaritan or any other Samaritan for that matter. While they were in their misery, they would eat together and live together without any distinctions. Now that they were healed, the nine would not have allowed themselves to sit at the same table with the Samaritan.

The same is true for many people today, no matter what their religious tradition. You've no doubt noticed that in misery or illness or in natural disasters, human beings can live and work together without making the usual artificial distinctions. Then you are united, and you are aware that you need each other. Then you are bold enough to color outside the lines. But when you come into prosperity, many people begin to separate themselves from others, and lines are drawn.

Note another truth that this story illustrates. 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 the least religious, who sees, hears, enjoys, and responds in gratitude to God for the many gifts that come every day.

The visitor in the home plays with the children, whom the parents have hardly noticed between coming home from work and reading the paper or watching the news on television. The visitor gives thanks to the one who has prepared the meal, which others have eaten a thousand times in silence.

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 that colors outside the lines that human beings are always creating. This love of God has nothing to do with how lovable you are. This love of God, as revealed especially in Jesus, is gracious to the creation, which God is always bringing into being, even when that creation pays little attention.

The people at home today, reading the newspaper 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 those who are here. Does that upset you?

Would it make you feel better if you knew that being here would cause God to love you more than those who are not here or in any church setting? Yet God goes on showering grace on the world and on you and me regardless, sustaining those who take it all for granted. 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 also that a deeper healing had taken place in that individual. The Samaritan who returned to give thanks and praise God was not only healed of his leprosy, he also knew how he had been healed and where his healing had come from. Thus, 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.

That’s the supreme lesson of faith in this story. It’s not that people of faith are any better than other people or that people of faith deserve or receive special treatment from God. The lesson is that people who praise God, as did the Samaritan, understand how the world really works. They understand and acknowledge that God is the source of all goodness and wholeness. They know that God frequently colors outside the lines we draw and that same God calls you and me to do the same. And that makes all the difference. Amen.