

Text: [Proverbs 8:1,22-32](#)
Date: January 20, 2019
Title: Healthy Relationships Series Week 3 – “Boundaries”
Theme: Respecting boundaries means recognizing the other person’s humanity – and your own.

Intro

There are times when the world around us butts into a preacher’s preparation in various kinds of ways

Of course I had no idea months ago when I proposed preaching on “Boundaries” that it would fall in the middle of a government shutdown over a boundary

It’s ironic, for sure

And I’m not positive that what I have to say about boundaries in relationships has much to say that’s helpful in thinking about borders between nations, per se

But I do think there’s a message here today about the fundamental tension between ‘me’ and ‘we’ in any Healthy Relationship

That tension exists between partners in a marriage, parents and kids

It’s a tension between distance and togetherness

Between the idea that we are uniquely created and loved by God and yet we’re also called by God to be deeply connected with one another

Sometimes the question boils down to when it’s time to care about others and when it’s time to care for ourselves

It’s complicated to navigate, for sure.

But that’s all in the background today while we talk about boundaries.

Question

Sermon

1

When Steph and I moved in to the house at the first church I served, there was a sign out front that read, “Methodist Parsonage”

I hated that sign

I hated it because what it meant was that at random times – and generally
the most inconvenient ones –
people you didn't know would show up at our door

Now the church is in the business of helping people – no question
And we should be available to offer assistance
But I hope you'll hear me on this –
it seemed a bridge too far to have a sign advertising our home as the place
to go at any hour of the day or night

So, after I was there a while, the sign got to be in bad shape
I took it down while I looked for someone to "refurbish" it
Curiously, I never found anyone!

Now, you may be thinking, "that story makes him sound like a real jerk"
"And he's our pastor!"
I don't necessarily disagree with that

2

That is kind of the point, though
It's why so many of us have a hard time with this idea of boundaries
Because sometimes setting boundaries makes us feel like jerks
But what can happen when we DON'T set boundaries is that we can allow
other people to act like jerks! (slide)

You know this already
If you've ever had a boss that consistently called you on your day off, when
you were on vacation, or all the time hit you with last-minute projects
on your way out the door – you know what I mean
You want to keep your job, you want to be a good employee
But no employer deserves to own ALL your time – no one gets paid enough
for that
I recently saw it put this way:¹
You don't owe your boss your family, your health, or your sanity

We start learning some of these lessons as early as preschool – but
certainly by the time we are in late elementary and middle school
There are some friendships that just demand too much of us

Maybe to be friends with someone, that person requires us to drop our
other friends

To adopt an attitude, or a look, or a way of talking that's not really us
Or to do things that we don't really want to do

Negotiating boundaries is something we are constantly doing – in every
relationship

It's the biggest part of what it means to be a self,
an individual who is different from other individuals

Why do parents clash with their kids so much when they enter
adolescence?

Because their kids are learning to be their own selves – and parents don't
necessarily like it!

3

Now I can say that, and everyone knows immediately what I mean –
because we've all been there – many of us on both ends of it
That's because it's the natural order of things

Whenever the Bible talks about creation, the picture is always the same
The raw material of the earth is described as “formless and void,” while the
Spirit of God hovers over the face of the deep (slide)

The Hebrew here is kind of fun: *tohu bohu*

Which is kind of the perfect word for chaos, right?

Why is the world in chaos?

Because everything is all mixed together

There are NO boundaries

Earth, sea, and sky – it's all one

And so creation is about separation – it's about boundaries

Light from darkness, water from land, earth from sky

And that repeats in all these passages that recount God's work in creation

In today's reading from Proverbs, we hear about God's wisdom that (slide)

“drew a circle on the face of the deep” to create the horizon v.27

and “assigned the sea its limit,

so that the waters might not transgress his command” v.29

I love how Job 38 describes this – it has God saying to the sea, “Thus far you shall come, and no farther! Here shall your proud waves be stopped!” (Job 38:11) (slide)

4

Have you ever met that couple that’s inseparable?
They’re never apart from each other?

Now, let me ask you a question – I really want you to think about this
If they are ALWAYS together, do you think they are both ALWAYS happy
about it?

It seems to me that, even if they split decisions about what they were going
to do every weekend right down the middle (and we all know that
doesn’t often happen)

both of them have to spend a significant amount of time being unhappy –
am I right?

If you remember me talking a couple weeks ago about what I learned from
Rabbi Friedman – he said this: (slide)

So much of what we admire as TOGETHERNESS in relationships is really
unhealthy STUCK-TOGETHERNESS²

In other words, someone’s inability to say, “Hey, I don’t like going to....”
(fill in the blank) “car shows”, “antique shops”, “brewery tours” or whatever.
Someone feels like they can’t say, “I’m just going to stay home” because of
guilt, because of fear of starting an argument, or whatever

But that ability to say, “Here’s what I like”

Or “Here’s what I believe”

Or “Here’s what I’m going to do”

It’s so important in any relationship.

To define yourself. To say what you want and what you don’t want.

To set your own boundaries.

Really what you’re saying in that moment is, “I’m a person too.”

That’s the reason why, when we do a marriage ceremony in the United
Methodist Church, and the couple wants a unity candle,

Our liturgy specifically says that you DON’T blow out the two side candles
that represent the bride and groom

When I got married, I didn't stop being Joe, and Steph didn't stop being Steph

And that's the trick – learning to navigate those differences between us, which it takes a lifetime to do

Togetherness vs. stuck-togetherness is the difference between LOVE and DEPENDENCY

5

I can think of at least 4 different kinds of boundaries we need in relationships: (slide)

PHYSICAL – it SHOULD go without saying that we have the right to control our own bodies. This precludes physical or sexual abuse of any kind. But it's also more subtle: there comes a day when your kids don't want you with them at the bus stop and they don't want you to kiss them good-bye in public. Again, these are hard things for parents to get over sometimes!

TIME/EFFORT/ENERGY – All of us have a million responsibilities: family, work, self. If someone in your life can't understand that you have to have times for each of those things, then it's time to renegotiate that boundary. Obviously, your ability to do that – especially, say, with an employer – may depend on the job market and a ton of other things, but it's important to realize what you can and CAN'T live with and retain your health, happiness and sanity.

DECISION-MAKING/CONTROL – There are times in everyone's life – early childhood, when we're really not well physically, emotionally, etc. that we all need help making decisions. But there are other times when people around us want to take decisions that need to be ours out of our hands, or when we are tempted to do that to someone else. Don't.

EMOTIONAL – My prayer for everyone is that you have at least one relationship where it's ok to share your deepest hurts and disappointments. A partner, a friend, a sibling, a parent or grandparent – someone. And of course, there are people like pastors and counselors for whom this is part of our job. But I think we've all been in situations where someone just opens the floodgates of their

pain without paying attention to who is about to get washed away. Don't be that person! At the same time, I hope you'll recognize that there are people who want to help you when you're hurting – and that shutting them out isn't a good approach either. The balance is important!

6

Boundaries are a necessary part of every relationship
They're part of the order of creation
They define each of us as a unique, individual self of infinite worth created and loved by God ([slide](#))

On this weekend when we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr and remember the Civil Rights movement in the United States
One way to talk about that work is to say it was about redefining boundaries

That whites no longer are going to make people of color go to the back of the bus
Or force someone to drink from a separate water fountain
Or deny them the vote or equal justice before the law
What this movement was about, and what we're still living into, is MLK's dream of recognizing the full humanity of each person

That's what it means to respect boundaries – is to respect that the person sitting across from me is a unique, unrepeatable creation of our incredible God
And you know what?
To understand that I too am a child of that same God, a human being worthy of love and respect

Friends, that's why boundaries matter. Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ

¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/6-things-you-dont-owe-your-boss-dr-travis-bradberry/>

² The main text I'm referring to in this series is Edwin Friedman's *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985). It's maybe a touch technical to wade through unless you have a great interest in family systems, but there are plenty of summaries available online to give you additional insight on the basic concepts.