

“The Boundaries of God’s Love”

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BASED ON THE THEME, “NEW BOUNDARIES FOR A NEW YEAR”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Jeremiah 31:7-14 [NRSV]

⁷For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, “Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel.” ⁸See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. ⁹With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

¹⁰Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, “He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.” ¹¹For the Lord has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

¹²They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. ¹³Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. ¹⁴I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the Lord.

If you read the newsletter this month you know that I am going to “boundary” training next week. I joked that you wouldn’t find me on the “boundary waters” canoeing – I’m not even sure where those are but I suspect they are somewhere frozen right now. I can also guarantee you I won’t be testing my “inner boundaries” by bungee-jumping anywhere.

No, the fact is that thanks to all those clergy misconduct cases the Florida Conference UCC has decided that every pastor in the conference has to have

“boundary training” every few years or we lose our “standing.” It’s like saying they will pull our license to clergy. So I am going to learn about how to maintain appropriate moral, ethical, and professional standards. I guess that means I shouldn’t snitch that dessert from you when I am sitting beside you at the next potluck.

But I got to thinking about that and it occurred to me that there are all kinds of boundaries in our lives. There are geographical boundaries. Where we live and where we can go are defined by both real and imaginary boundaries. Oceans

and mountains are one kind. State lines and national borders are another kind. There are sociological boundaries of race and ethnicity. There are economic boundaries. And I would suggest that there are spiritual boundaries as well.

Like a lot of things spiritual I believe spiritual boundaries cross over a lot of those other areas. I believe our spiritual boundaries are affected by economic, social and even geographical boundaries and vice versa. For example, many poor southerners have grown up with different spiritual boundaries than affluent northerners generally speaking.

The other factor that occurred to me is that there are self-imposed boundaries and those that are externally imposed. There are appropriate boundaries, no doubt. There are some that we ought to regain. There might be some we ought to let go of, cross over, do away with because they keep us from going where God really wants us to go.

Some would say that the battle in Christianity over homosexuality is a boundary fight. The United Church of Christ has redefined itself in the past few years by proudly proclaiming its history of crossing boundaries. We were the first denomination to ordain a woman, the first primarily European American denomination to ordain an African-American to ministry and the first to ordain an openly gay man.

Many denominations are battling over these boundaries now. Some say that such actions violate “traditional” boundaries of Christianity. Others of us point out that in the past “traditional”

Christianity was used to argue for slavery, for the slaughter of Jews, and for the oppression of women. They would also point out that Jesus continually stepped over the social and religious boundaries of his time and he never said a word about homosexuality that was recorded in any of the gospels. Whether you agree or disagree, I point all this out to raise the issue of boundaries for us to explore in these coming weeks.

This morning’s Scripture invites us to the boundaries and borders of Israel. God is bringing the people back from exile in a foreign land. Jeremiah is speaking to the people and the tone, for a change, is joyful. “Sing aloud with gladness,” God tells the prophet to say to the people. “Proclaim, give praise and say, ‘O Lord, you save your people, the remnant of Israel.’” So God is crossing the boundaries of nations to bring back his people.

It seems that the people of Israel had to endure the hard times of exile to be ready to go back with God. Before being dragged off into exile they had thought God was on their side. They had professed and proclaimed that they were God’s favored. But they were ignoring God’s boundaries. They were worshiping other gods. They were ignoring God’s call for mercy and compassion for the poor, the widow, and the outcast. They ignored God’s boundaries of justice. And ultimately their actions not only alienated them from God it alienated them from their homes and nation. But something happened while they were enduring hard times. Something happened in the exile

of that difficult period. They realized that God was with them even there. They redeveloped their relationship with the God who had always been with them, but whom they had pretty much ignored when things were going their way. They had set up a boundary for God to be in one part of their lives but not in another and that never works. So now, on the other side of a national boundary, somewhere in a foreign land, they figured out that God was not bound by human boundaries.

As we cross the boundary of 2009 into 2010 it seems to me a good time to reflect on our own situation. 2009 was a hard year for many and many face a hard 2010. But maybe that imaginary boundary of a New Year can help us rethink our boundaries with God. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that those who are having a hard time are not spiritual enough or have somehow ignored God and therefore have been exiled from God. In fact, I think the message of Jeremiah is that God does not live by our boundaries. We may try to keep God out, but God will come in. We may set up boundaries that we think make parts of our lives safe from God, but God rarely abides these. God comes into our lives and oversteps our boundaries to remind us we are his and he isn't giving up on us, and even the bad times aren't a sign of God's rejection or neglect. Perhaps, like the Israelites, we can use hard times to reflect on our relationship with God and whether we trust God to be with us in good times and bad.

When we listen to Scripture closely, and Jeremiah is no exception, what we hear is that God is continually rescuing people. Again and again God rescues people from calamity and disaster. In this instance God says, "I have redeemed him from hands too strong for him." In short, they could not rescue themselves from their predicament. The situation was too tough for them to extricate themselves. But God did not leave them. God did not give up on them. Indeed, God was with them and at the right time God brought down the barriers and brought them home. "He who scattered Israel will gather him," says God and so God did and so God does.

So flash forward from a few thousand years before Christ to today and the message is still there, and so is God. God is still redeeming his people from hands too strong for them. Is your situation bleak as the New Year begins? Does it seem too tough to overcome, does it seem too difficult to ever get better? Have circumstances built a boundary that seems too far away to come back from it? Meet God, the boundary breaker. Meet God who has redeemed you from hands too strong for you.

Think God is only for those who are better than you, more faithful than you, more holy than you? God also proclaims that he is crossing those boundaries as well. He is not just bringing back the strongest athletes, the most brilliant Nobel Peace Prize - winners, or the richest entrepreneurs. God is not only redeeming the Bible-

thumpers or the ones who believe God is for-sure on their side and the rest of us heathens can just get ready for our comeuppance. God is bringing back the blind and the lame, the women at full term for delivering a child as well as those who have children already. These were the ones who would be most at-risk on such a journey. They would slow the rest and be a burden to care for. But God does not leave them behind. God chooses to lead them back, and to “let them walk by brooks of water, on a straight path where they will not stumble.”

God crosses the boundaries of what we would call logical and reasonable and sensible and does what is compassionate and merciful. God does not care only for those who are able. God cares for the most vulnerable and the message to us is that all people are God’s people, despite the boundaries we might set up as to who is acceptable and who isn’t. The boundaries of God’s love defy the boundaries we build to keep other people away from God, or that others build to keep us away.

Now, here’s the kicker in the boundary department. We have just survived another Christmas, and lest we forget its strange and extraordinary message, let me remind you. The message of Christmas is that God has kicked down another boundary. God has pushed through another barrier. In Jeremiah God may have brought the people back to him. In Jesus, God has come to us. God has crossed over the boundaries into human territory. We have heard the message so often we may

fail to marvel at its amazing claim. God has crossed over the border of life into our territory.

The good news according to the gospels is that God’s coming is not something to fear, but something that brings great joy to all people. According to the angels God comes to proclaim peace and goodwill. Jeremiah says, “The Lord has ransomed Jacob.” And he describes the future that God has in store for us. “They shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd.” In fact, Jeremiah even makes a crack about the priests having “their fill of fatness!” And God promises that, “my people shall be satisfied with my bounty.” Do you think you could be satisfied with God’s bounty in your life?

I don’t know what boundaries you were living by this past year, and I don’t know what you expect your boundaries to be in 2010. I think the question for all of us is whether we will be satisfied with God’s bounty. God continually reminds us that he has crossed the boundary into our territory to be with us. Now the question is will we be satisfied with God’s bounty in our lives? After all, there are no boundaries to God’s love. AMEN.