

### **“Breaking Boundaries”**

“He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum,’ which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about ...”

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven ... a time to break down, and a time to build up” – Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3.*

In my home town, there were boundaries that were erected for good reasons:

- Don’t cross the street alone.
- Stay away from the highway.
- Don’t take what doesn’t belong to you.
- Always address adults as “Mr.” or “Mrs.”

But there were other boundaries that needed to be broken down, the most divisive being the racial boundary that divided the communities of Plainfield and North Plainfield. Even though they were only divided by a very shallow stream, the social division was as wide and profound as the Mississippi River. People in the two communities rarely associated with one another, and the Caucasian and African-American population lived in segregated neighborhoods. This racial boundary was one that needed to be broken.

*“A time to break down, and a time to build up.”*

Boundaries within the Jewish community of Jesus’ time help shape today’s Gospel lesson. Many of these boundaries were not of human invention, but are rooted in God’s teachings in the Torah, boundaries that helped define the people of Israel as a nation chosen by God to be a blessing to all people. The boundaries established in the Law of Moses help us understand the position of the two major figures in the story: Jairus, *“one of the leaders of the synagogue”* (Mark 5:22), and an unnamed woman *“who had been suffering with hemorrhages for twelve years”* (5:25). As a religious leader of the community, Jairus would have been expected to conform both to the dictates of the Torah and the expectations of his fellow synagogue members; he would have been trained *“to be competent, to get things done, [and] to keep it all together.”* (David Lose). While Jairus was an insider within the community, the woman’s condition would have rendered her an outsider; her flow of blood would have made her ritually impure (*“If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days ... for all the days of discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean.”* – Leviticus 15:25) and subject to social isolation:

- *“The woman’s status as unclean alienates her physically from family and friends. Other people need to avoid contact with her body, her used clothing, and the places where she sits and sleeps.” – Willie Dwayne Francois III, *The Christian Century*.*

While both Jairus and the unnamed woman had lived within the accepted boundaries of their community, both of them reach a crisis moment in which boundaries needed to be broken. For Jairus, it was the serious illness of his daughter, who is *“at the point of death.”* (5:23). As a wealthy and influential leader of the community, Jairus would have been expected to send an emissary to request that Jesus visit his daughter. But the seriousness of his daughter’s illness and his desperation to find a cure compel Jairus to break the boundaries of expected behavior when he seeks out Jesus and *“when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.’”* (5:22-23).

- “I’ve got a twelve-year-old daughter, too, and I can’t imagine the desperate agony of watching her dwindle away, disappearing before my eyes in the grip of illness. Actually, I *can* imagine it, which helps me understand why Jairus runs to Jesus himself, instead of sending an emissary, as a leader normally would. I can understand why Jairus throws himself at Jesus’ feet, rather than address him as an equal. And I can understand why Jairus doesn’t inquire, or politely ask, or even petition, but *begs* Jesus to come. He’s desperate; his love for his daughter has left him utterly vulnerable.” – David Lose.

In his moment of desperation, boundaries no longer matter. Jairus’ daughter is severely ill, and he places his trust in the one person who he believes can make her well. Jairus’ love for his daughter becomes more important than the boundaries he was expected to maintain. *“He, too, knows Jesus’ reputation as a healer and is certain that if Jesus lays hands on the girl she will recover.”* (Pheme Perkins).

While she has been on the opposite side of the boundaries for the twelve years of her affliction, the woman has also reached a moment of desperation in which restrictions and limitations no longer matter. The length of her affliction and the fact that she has been impoverished by spending all her resources on doctors who only made her condition worse underline the crisis of her situation. Like Jairus, the woman has heard of Jesus’ reputation as a healer and concludes that *“if I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.”* (5:28). The social and religious boundaries that would have isolated her from both Jesus and the crowds around him no longer matter; while she was formerly kept apart from other people who would have avoided contact with her body, her used clothing, and even the places where she sat or slept, she is *“part of the crowd of people pressing in on Jesus. Her presence is an act of civil disobedience.”* (Francois).

The woman’s faith in Jesus’ power to heal is rewarded when upon touching Jesus’ clothing *“immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.”* (5:29). Jesus is also aware that something has happened; he immediately recognizes that healing power has passed from him to the woman, and turns to the crowd and asks them *“who touched my clothes?”* (5:30). The disciples continue to be ignorant of Jesus’ real power, wondering at Jesus’ claim that someone had touched him (*“You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’”* – 5:31); but the woman comes forward *“in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.”* (5:33). This exchange between Jesus and the woman removes any suggestion that Jesus’ clothes were endowed with magical power, nor does Jesus condemn her for an attempted “theft” of his power. Jesus’ healing reflects the presence of God’s saving power, the fact that in Jesus the fullness of God’s presence was dwelling in the midst of God’s people:

- “See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.” – Deuteronomy 32:39.
- “Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” – Isaiah 35:4-6.
- “Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.” – Hosea 11:3.

Jesus points to the woman’s faith, not any magical powers in his garments, as the real agent of healing and pronounces the cure permanent: *“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”* (5:34).

Jesus’ encounter with and healing of the woman have delayed his arrival at the bedside of Jairus’ daughter. The leader of the synagogue has been waiting on the sidelines as Jairus *“observes the healing consequences of the woman’s rebellious reach – bodily wholeness and emotional security.”* (Francois). But when they finally reach his estate, Jairus is greeted with the devastating news that his daughter has died. The presence of

mourners who are *“weeping and wailing loudly”* (5:38) confirms the reality of the little girl’s death. For Jairus, the ultimate boundary has been erected, that which separates the living from the dead, a loving father from his daughter who died far too young.

But another boundary is about to be breached; when Jesus comes into the presence of the mourners, he says to them *“why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.”* (5:39). When the crowd responds with laughter, Jesus puts them all outside and enters the room where the child’s body has been laid, along with the child’s father and mother as well as Peter, James, and John, the disciples he had allowed to follow him. Jesus takes the child’s lifeless hand and speaks to her in his native tongue, *“Talitha cum,”* which means, *‘Little girl, get up!’*” (5:41). To the astonishment of all, the little girl immediately gets up and begins to walk; Jesus then tells them to give her something to eat, proof that life has been restored and the boundary of death has been breached.

*A time to build up, and a time to break down.*

There are times when it is appropriate to build up boundaries. For Israel, the boundaries dictated in the Torah were an important element in defining Israel as a distinctive people called by God. It was through the boundaries of the Law that the people understood what it meant to be God’s holy people and how they were to live in covenant with the Lord who *“brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”* (Exodus 20:2). But with the coming of Jesus Christ, many of those boundaries were no longer relevant, because it was Christ’s mission to tear down boundaries in order to reconcile all people both to God and to one another. A central aspect of Christ’s ministry was to break down boundaries that had no place in the kingdom of God:

- *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death the hostility through it.”* – Ephesians 2:13-16.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus goes out of his way to reach across boundaries and breach walls that had been separating people for generations. He dares to be seen in the presence of *“tax collectors and sinners,”* among the most despised members of society. He reaches out to and heals lepers, another group considered as unclean as the woman he heals on the way to Jairus’ house. He crosses the border into Samaria, a place where no one of his community would dare enter and has a conversation with a Samaritan woman who was an outcast among her fellow Samaritans. At the moment of his death, *“the curtain in the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom”* (Matthew 27:51), for now the boundaries that had separated God from God’s people had been broken. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ means that boundaries that once separated us from God’s loving presence have been overcome, so that nothing will keep us apart from the eternal blessings that are ours when we are baptized in Christ Jesus:

- *“Who will separate us from the love of God? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* – Romans 8:35-39.

The miracles of Jesus served two purposes: they brought healing to the persons he encountered, and they witnessed to the coming of the kingdom of God, in which all that seeks to separate us from God and from one another – including death, the ultimate boundary – might be no more. Jesus’ teachings and miracles testify to

his being anointed *“to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus’ miracles point us to that day when *“God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:3-4). As the boundaries were broken so that the woman might be healed and the daughter of Jairus restored to life, in Christ we have the assurance that *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.”*

*A time to break down.*

As Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation broke down barriers that were no longer necessary or appropriate, we are called as his holy people to continue this work of reconciliation. As we have been reconciled to God through Christ’s death and resurrection, we in turn have been entrusted to be stewards of this message of reconciliation, which is the heart of the gospel message the Church is called to proclaim:

- *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* – 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

As *“ambassadors,”* we are called to represent Christ, to make Christ known to others, to have *“no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve; and spread God’s liberating word.”* (ELW Hymn 729). We are called to make certain that we do not erect barriers that Christ has torn down, nor replace boundaries that do not belong in the Kingdom of God.

- *“The necessity of the church can be expressed [in] the very nature of the Christian message to which faith is a response. For it is a message of *reconciliation*. That is, ‘gospel’ is about the love of God, revealed through Christ, which reconciles us to all from which we have been estranged – not only God, but also other human beings and the creation itself.”*
- *“Christianity does have a mission to the world, and that mission is the most basic reason for the existence of the church ... it is ‘sent out’ (that is what the word *apostolic* means), usually against its will, by the God who has called it into being, because of love for ... *the world.*”* – Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?*

I would like to report that the boundary that divided my hometown no longer exists; but while the neighborhoods are not longer as segregated as before and there are greater interactions between communities, the walls of racial divide are still far too present and strong. All around us are barriers and boundaries that have no place in God’s creation and in God’s kingdom, walls that separate us from God’s healing love and gracious presence. As *“to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven,”* the time has come for us as ambassadors of God’s reconciling love to break down the walls, breach the barriers, disassemble the boundaries, so that nothing might separate us from God, from one another, or from the blessings of life and salvation that are ours through our boundary-breaking Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.