

BOUNDARIES OR FRONTIERS?

Sermon, February 20, 2011

Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48, I Corinthians 3:10-23

It was a third grade Sunday School teacher who had decided the class would play church, complete with individual students acting as a minister, ushers, a choir, an organist and all the remaining students as the congregation. After a while they tired of playing the game; after all, there was no real organ and no pews, so it was all a bit hard to figure out. So one boy suggested, "I know, let's stop playing church. Let's play Jesus!" Well, that was a new one for the class and it sounded like a great idea. So, the teacher asked the boy to explain how he thought the game should be played. The boy replied one person would play Jesus, and the rest would be mean to him, call him names, push him around, then take him outside and tie him to a tree and pretend to crucify him. Well, that took a bit of the glow off the honor of playing Jesus, so nobody was quick to volunteer for the starring role. So, the boy who initiated the idea volunteered to be the main figure. Apparently, the classmates got a little too involved in the play acting. After a few minutes of vociferous name calling, jeering, and one push too many, they were about to take the boy playing the part of Jesus outside to tie him to the tree and the boy called a halt to it all. In so doing he said something pretty profound. He said, "Let's not play Jesus anymore, it's too hard. Let's go back to playing church."

Playing Jesus is a little harder than playing church, isn't it? It's tough playing Jesus! We know we are to be Jesus to our world; we are called to represent Him wherever we live and work. Are we playing Jesus, or are we just playing church? There is a difference. How do we move from playing church to actually playing Jesus? Where do we begin? Our Scripture texts suggest we begin by reminding ourselves of two main things (1) who we are and who we are called to be, and (2) where we are headed. In other words, what are we doing here, what is our end goal?

(1) In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" We are not just a social gathering, although we are that. Nor are we just a cross-generational family support group, a "family of families," although we are that, as well. Nor are we a political action group, although at times we may engage in that activity. We, collectively, are a holy temple, the temple of the living God. God's Spirit dwells within us. When Paul writes his letter to the Corinthians, you'll remember he is writing to a church being torn apart by dissension, the fractious congregation of Corinth we talked about back in January. If you'll remember, this wasn't the "United Church of Corinth;" it was the "*Untied* Church of Corinth" because so many in that congregation did not put their "I" in the proper place. It was apparently a demanding, mixed-bag, hard-to-please congregation of massive egos and factions and splinter groups. It reminds me of the story of a shoe salesman who had shown a certain customer more than twenty-five pairs of shoes, only to have her settle for the very first pair she had tried on. As she paid for her purchase and was leaving the store, he said to her, "Thank you for coming. I wish I had a dozen customers like you!" One of the other clerks overheard him, and when the fussy customer was gone, said, "You told her you wished you had a dozen of customers like her. How can you say that to such an overbearing, picky, hard-to-please person?" "Because it's true," said the salesman. "Actually, I have a *hundred* customers just like her, and I wish I only had a dozen!"

The church in Corinth probably had at least a hundred hard to please, disgruntled, overbearing constituents who apparently were playing church. One group wanted to go one way, another group wanted to go another. And Paul wants them to start playing Jesus instead of playing church, he wants them to focus on their "... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all," and they are following multiple leaders, dividing into factions, and as mentioned earlier, just coming untied, undone as a congregation. After telling them they are God's temple, he writes a stern warning: "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is sacred, and *you are that temple.*" (V. 17, *emphasis mine*) Note the *present* tense ... Paul doesn't say, "You ought to be God's temple", or "One day you will be God's temple, if you get your collective act together." No, it's, "You are God's temple, and God's temple is sacred." We are God's temple ... we are one body, the body of Jesus Christ. If we are going to play Jesus, as opposed to playing church, we must constantly remind ourselves who we are, who we are called to be, and act accordingly by working together, praying together, striving together in unity and common purpose to a common goal.

(2) Well, what is that common goal?

Jesus says in our text from Matthew 5 (verse 48), "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And there in our Old Testament reading the Lord speaks to Moses and says: "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'" So God says in the Old Testament, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." And Jesus says in the New Testament, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." When Jesus says this, it is quite likely He is referring to what would be to that crowd the well known words from our Leviticus reading. Perfection and holiness are synonyms. Perfection and holiness ... that's our common goal.

Well, that's a pretty high goal. That's a pretty demanding standard. How are you all doing with that? If I asked you for a show of hands of how many of you consider yourselves to be perfect and holy, I doubt we would see many hands in the air! And if you did raise your hand, the chances are great that after worship during coffee hour in Fellowship Hall, no one would want to talk to you. While we find great comfort in worshipping a God who is holy and perfect, we tend to find people who think of themselves as perfect and holy as somewhat ... well, odd at best, irritating at worst, if not totally suffering from delusions of grandeur. Why would Jesus, or God for that matter, command perfection, holiness? After all, who can possibly attain it? Are we perhaps *missing* something here?

Interestingly, other translations have, "*You shall* be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy." "You shall" proceeds the imperative "Be;" and that's missing from our pew Bible translations. The Matthew passage can be translated in the same manner. Instead of "Be perfect", Matthew 5:48 can be read to say, "*You shall* be perfect." From the context, I really don't think Jesus is saying, "You better be as perfect as God, or else!" thus setting impossibly high boundaries for holy behavior ... "*do this and this and this and don't do that or that or that, and you might just attain perfection.*" No, I think He is more about opening up frontiers than He is about setting boundaries here. Now, boundaries are good; rules and standards do have their place. Every day I drive along well-defined boundaries on my way to the church, boundaries measured by yellow and white lines on the road and little red, yellow and green lights suspended in the air that I (usually) heed. Those boundaries keep me from crashing into other people along the way to the office, but I *could* avoid crashing into others by simply parking the car and going nowhere. However, the main purpose of those boundaries is to keep me moving along, to keep me moving forward, to help me get to my destination safe and sound and quickly! In the same manner, God has given us boundaries in His good law; they are there as a means to an end, not as an end in themselves. They are there to keep us moving, moving forward in the Way, moving us onward and upward to exciting new frontiers! First He sets our boundaries; then He inspires us with frontiers ... high and lofty destinations ... which make us want to stay in the boundaries so we can get to the goal more quickly!

Some read this "Be perfect!" and perceive Jesus is talking about boundaries and restrictions only. However, if translated to read, "*You shall* be perfect ..." Not shall as in *must*, but shall as in *will* ... then we have Jesus saying, "*You will* be perfect, just as your Father and My Father in heaven is perfect." That transforms restrictive boundary language into inspiring frontier language! It makes us want to heed the boundaries as we strive to greater heights. "You shall be perfect, you will be perfect, for you belong to your perfect Father!" (*I say this to my kids all the time...not. But I do try to encourage them by word and admittedly imperfect example to act in imitation of the perfect Heavenly Father.*)

Do you see? "You shall be perfect ..." "You shall be holy ..." These are not so much imperatives or threats as they are *promises*.. The promise is that one day we shall be perfect ... whole, complete, holy, perfect ... because we belong to a perfect heavenly Father. The Leviticus reading can also be translated, "You shall be, you will be, holy, because I am holy." Also note this: Leviticus 20:8 says, "I am the Lord, *who makes you holy.*" We are holy because God is holy, and we are in the process of being made like Him. That is our common goal. That is our destination.

How do we move from playing church to playing Jesus? We start off knowing what the end result will be. We start off knowing we will grow up to be like our Father one day. We start off by knowing and trusting that His good boundaries lead to the frontiers of perfection, holiness, wholeness, goodness. So, let's do all we can individually and as a church to head in that direction, mindful of the boundaries He has set along the way! Perfection is found in the Heavenly Father. He is the measure, the true standard, of perfection. The context of Jesus' teaching here is that the true standard of perfection is not to be found in the standards set by the Pharisees. In fact, perfection cannot be found in any subjective human measure or standard; God is the standard of perfection. And as we grow in relation to our perfect Father, then we will more and more be able to perceive and understand and discover and practice and aim toward perfection, and the more we do that, the better our life will be and the more our lives will be salt and light to the world about us. We may never achieve perfection this side of heaven, but that is certainly no excuse not to try! Let us in all things aim to be like our heavenly Father, and let us do so with the confidence that one day we actually will grow up to be like him. *That's playing Jesus.*

For example, Jesus says in verse 43: "*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.*" Someone might take this to mean that you must first become a person who loves his enemies *before* you can be a child of God. But no, Jesus does not mean that loving our enemies *earns us the right* to be a child of God. We can never earn that right; it comes only by grace. Jesus means love your enemies and so show yourself to be who you are already ... you are a child of God. That is, you display you are a son or daughter by acting the way your perfect Father acts. So, love your enemies and so show God is your Father. If you are God's child, then you will be more and more inclined to do what He does. *That's playing Jesus.*

"You shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," says Jesus ... "You shall be holy, as I am holy," says God. And *that's* a promise. Let us respond accordingly.