

# BRIDGING TROUBLED WATERS

Sermon, October 2, 2011

World Communion Sunday

Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; Philippians 3:4b-14

Bridges often strike fear in the hearts of those who attempt to cross over on them. Some people, like my mother, just hate crossing over on bridges. When I was younger, my family used to visit my father's brother in Key West, FL, and it was often a source of family amusement that Mom would just be a nervous Nellie as we crossed that seven mile long span connecting the Keys. *(I know she is not alone; the term "gephyrophobia" has been coined for those who suffer a fear of bridges. I've been told the New York Thruway Authority will actually lead gephyrophobiacs over the Tappan Zee Bridge. A driver can call the Authority in advance and arrange for someone to drive the car over the bridge for them. The Authority does this service about 6 times a year; see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gephyrophobia>).* Fortunately, this is one trait I did not inherit from my mother. Personally, I have no problem driving a car across a bridge. I know there are huge drop-offs on either side of any bridge, but when I'm going across I have never once hugged the guard-rails, changed my rate of speed *(either by slowing down to be extra careful or by nervously speeding up to hurry across)*, or bumped into any iron or cement barriers.

However, if someone were to take away the guard rails, or remove the concrete and steel side girders, get rid of the bumper-barricades on the bridge, or take away the bridge scaffolding, I'd be a different driver. I'd probably crawl across such a bridge at five or ten miles per hour! Without protection on either side to keep my car from plunging right off the bridge, I'm not sure I would even make it one hundred yards without succumbing to gephyrophobia. Even though many of us have no difficulty staying on the road, there is something about the perceived protection of the barriers that is reassuring to us drivers. We need the security of guard rails and barriers. They help us get across the troubled waters and chasms and valleys below, but to be sure, *they aren't the bridge ... they're designed to keep us on the bridge.*

We need the security of guard rails and barriers in life, as well. We need rules and principles and standards and prohibitions to keep us on track. If they're not there, or if they are ignored and/or disregarded and/or flaunted by others around us, life becomes exponentially more anxious and even terrifying. In fact, like bridge barriers, the rules and principles and standards and prohibitions work best when they are barely noticed; if you know they are there, you almost don't even need them. Without their presence and protection and guidance, however, we risk going off the deep end. But to be sure: the guard rails and barriers are *not* the bridge. They are *not* the way. They are designed to keep us *on* the way.

Paul wrote this week's words to the Philippian Christians to warn them about focusing on the guardrails and safety guards rather than the Bridge carrying them across the valleys and gulfs and troubled waters of life. Yes, we all need principles and standards and doctrines and dogmas. But they are the guard rails of our faith, not the Guardian of our faith. They help keep us on the way, but they are not the way. Their function is to help keep us on the Way, in the Truth, and living the Life. Life is not found by a continual focusing on and even obsessing of rules and regulations and boundaries and barriers; the Way, the Truth and the Life is found in a relationship with the One Who *is* the Way, the Truth and the Life, Jesus Christ. As Jesus Himself said, He didn't come to abolish the barriers and guard rails, He didn't come to abolish what came before, the Law and the "guardrails" it contains; He came to fulfill the Law, to complete it.

We tend to think of the Old Testament Laws as restrictive, but even they were more about relationships, rather than restrictions. In fact, when we look closely, the Ten Commandments are really all about relationships. The first four commands deal with our relationship with God ... have no other gods before God; worship God directly and don't worship idols or images, hallow and honor (don't misuse) God's name, keep one day in seven special as a day to worship and nurture your relationship with God. The second six commands deal with our relationships with each other, beginning right at home with honoring your father and mother, then no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, no lusting after your neighbors' goods ... all these have to do with our relations with others. In short, there is to be no taking or even thinking about taking what does not belong to you, whether another's life, another's spouse or another's property. Jesus even reduced the Ten to two, which was really a summary of the Ten: Love God, and Love Others. The focal purpose of these commandments has always been relational ... our relationship with God and with each other.

The context of the lectionary Epistle reading this morning is there were people in Philippi who were insisting that to *really* be Christian, one must also be faithful to all the precepts of Judaism, including circumcision, dietary regulations, special seasons of worship and so on. These teachers, the so-called "Judaizers," were teaching that Gentile followers of Jesus had to become fully "Jewish" before they could become real Christians. There were laws to follow. Hoops to jump through. Painful procedures to endure. Commandments to keep. Diets to eat. Provisions and proscriptions that must be met before they could enjoy full membership in the body of Christ.

Paul would have none of it! This was focusing on guard rails, even *worshipping* guard rails; this was insisting upon your making your way through the roadway of life by avoiding the barriers! I'm sure you've seen people drive like this ... they drive in a constant state of anxiety avoiding barriers rather than focusing on the road ahead. On Friday in Massachusetts I was following a woman like this ... it was during the rush hour when you are allowed to drive in the breakdown lane, and this woman was obviously not very comfortable doing so ... she drove erratically, and once in her anxious attempts to avoid the barriers on her right she strayed over the line on her left and came within inches of clipping a huge dump truck. Driving is so much easier when you just focus on the roadway!

Paul warns the Philippian church that such focus on, attention to and worship of the guard-rails can actually be subversive of Jesus' sacrifice. For Paul, righteousness was about a right relationship with God, and this had never been achieved, nor ever will be achieved, through the workings of the Law. A new way of salvation had been incarnated and inaugurated in Jesus Christ, a way that put a Person above propositions, a way that put personal relationship above written codes of conduct.

It's been said we live in a world of informational obesity and relational anorexia. As electronic wizardry brings us into immediate touch with more raw data and more "knowledge" than any previous generation ever dreamed of, we are gorging ourselves with knowledge and yet are suffering from relational anorexia. We know things, not people. We know how to make a living, but we don't know how to make a life. We know how to do work, but we don't know how to be a friend. Paul tells the Philippians he had been intellectually obese ... he had all the right knowledge and all the right connections to guarantee his success in life. But he realized he was completely ignorant about the most important thing a human life could experience: a right relationship with God. Filled with knowledge, Paul was starving to death spiritually. Only a wholly different kind of "knowing" and "being known" satisfied Paul now.

Paul didn't mince words. He told the Philippians all the advantages and accomplishments he had in his life before the Damascus Road were "trash," "garbage," "worthless," compared to knowing Jesus Christ. The only thing that mattered to Paul was the fact that he now "knew" Christ. He was on the most sure and secure Bridge ever built to cross over the troubled waters of this life. He didn't need the scaffolding and guard rails of being an Israelite, or a Hebrew, or a Benjaminite. He didn't need the guard rails of pious Pharisaism.

For Paul, all that mattered was to "know Christ" and to "make Christ known." You may remember the "Just Say No" slogan popularized by Nancy Reagan back in the eighties. Well, Paul's slogan might be to "Just Say KNOW".... Know Christ and make Him known, which is a far better strategy than just saying "No" all the time. Yes, we have the dogmas of faith. Doctrines. Laws. Propositions. Principles. They are not bad safeguards to have around us. But THEY are not the bridge. Only Jesus is the Bridge, only Jesus is the Way, Who carries us over the troubled waters of this world and eventually brings us home to the next.

And as we come to this Table this morning, we acknowledge with Paul and the church around the world the good news that God did not send us more Rules and Regulations, He sent us a Redeemer. The good news that God did not send us a Statement; He sent us a Savior. The good news that God did not send us another Principle, He sent a Person.

And that Person was Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, our Redeemer, our Lord, our Friend, who gave His body and His blood for us to become our Bridge ... the Bridge Who will take us safely across every chasm, every challenge, every valley of our lives, the Bridge over all Troubled Waters ... and the One Who will carry us safely through this life and on into life eternal.