

We live in a world of boundaries. And boundaries can be helpful. Like when they keep the Huns from invading China. (Slide of Great Wall). Boundaries can mean different things to different people. (slide of Palestinian wall) Israelis argue this wall is to keep people safe. Palestinians argue that this wall keeps them from their jobs, their fields, their families. And we have our own boundaries in the US. (slide of Mexican border). But some boundaries are more subtle. Boundaries are a part of our identity and help us know who we are in relation to other people. If you see someone wearing this logo (BSU slide), you'll know that they are not fans of the school represented by this logo (U of I slide), and vice versa.

Some boundaries aren't immediately apparent. Sometimes you need to understand cultural contexts to spot them—from clothing to the cars we drive to the neighborhoods in which we live—there are all sorts of boundaries that help us figure out who we are and help us figure out how we relate to others.

Some boundaries are natural. Mountains are pretty effective borders. As are rivers and oceans. But some boundaries are just lines in the sand. Literally.

Boundaries are not all bad. They keep us safe. But they are illusory to a degree. We might, for example, feel safer with a big fence running along the length of our border, but the reality is that borders don't keep everything out. Despite the wall on our Southern border, swine flu made it across.

For Peter and Cornelius, boundaries helped them navigate their world. Each of them came from cultures with clearly defined boundaries and expectations. Peter was a Jewish follower of Jesus, who still kept the traditional Jewish diet and religious practices. Cornelius was a Roman centurion and a God fearer—someone who follows the precepts of Judaism, but has stopped short of circumcision and full conversion. It appears that the earliest practices of the Jesus followers was to keep the boundaries, the distinctions in place. If you were a Jew who followed Christ, you hung out with other Jews who followed Christ. If you were a gentile, you hung out with other gentile converts. And really, are we that different today? We tend to gather with people with whom we can identify.

So, when we think of Peter and Cornelius, don't think of this as just history. Think of this story as here and now.

Our text this morning follows immediately after the text we talked about during the time with the children. Peter is preaching and the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. Then, catch the prejudice embedded in the text. "The circumcised believers (translation: Jewish Jesus followers) who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles."

How often do we do that? Invite people to join us, but then assume that we are still the only ones with the gifts?

Because they had been preaching the Good News to the Gentiles. They believed Jesus when he said to take his gospel to the whole world. But they seemed to operate as if those new converts had to act exactly like them to receive the gifts of the Spirit. Back at the turn of the 20th century there was a church in Tucson, Arizona that sent money to the many Native American Reservations in Arizona. The gospel told them to take care of the poor. So they did. They sent money and clothing and food support. But then people started leaving the Reservation and came to the cities, including Tucson. And where did they go? They went to the church that had so faithfully supported them.

But the white congregation in Tucson wasn't quite ready for integration. Sending money and support to the Reservation was one thing. Having those people show up to worship was something else entirely. So the Tucson congregation started a new congregation so the Native Americans would have their own place to worship. While that story makes me sad on many levels, it is not all bad news. The Holy Spirit was not to be deterred. This new congregation became Southside Presbyterian Church. It is a beacon for social justice in our denomination, a place where all are welcomed, an active leader in the sanctuary movement, and a reminder that God's ways are not in our control. Nor will they be held back by our boundaries and walls.

We can see the breaking down of Peter's boundaries in this text. At the beginning, he has a clear understanding of what is clean and unclean. But Peter moves to see that if the Holy Spirit has visited the Gentiles, there is nothing to separate them anymore.

And Cornelius' assumptions are changed too. There was no reason that a Roman Centurion, no matter how faithful a man, would feel a need to invite Peter into his home. Yet the angel told him to do it, and so he does.

The Spirit challenges our assumptions. She keeps putting us in situations where we are not comfortable. Imagine having someone come to your

house who is from a foreign country. You don't know their food preferences. You don't know their cultural traditions or expectations. You want to be a good host, but are aware that you will likely get something wrong. There was a young man from Kenya in a small group I was leading at the Presbyterian Youth Triennium in 1998. He became a friend and the next summer, we hosted him for a few weeks when he was back in the States. He stayed with us and with some other members of the congregation. It was both a great experience and an exhausting one. For all of us. Our food preferences were different. Our life experiences were different. For example, he didn't understand, no matter how much I tried to explain it to him, why I got in my car and drove to a gym to run on a treadmill. I realized that it defied explanation even to me.

But it was one of those great experiences where we could shed light on each other's cultures in ways that we couldn't do by ourselves. Lots of people in America drive to the gym to run on a treadmill. It never occurred to me, before he mentioned it, how ridiculous that is.

So Peter and Cornelius, at the urging of the Holy Spirit, come together, tearing down boundaries and trusting God who brought them together. They were each given visions that allowed them to see the world differently. To see their relationship with each other differently. To see their boundaries differently.

But it isn't easy for them. Peter winds up in all sorts of trouble in the next chapter. Not for baptizing Cornelius and his friends. But for eating dinner with them.

Listening to the voice of the Spirit is not without risks. It will certainly put you in uncomfortable situations. It will cause you to reconsider. It might even get you in trouble. But it will also help you break down the boundaries that either you have built for yourself or your society has built for you.

The question for you is this: where is the Holy Spirit calling you to break down your boundaries? Who is out there in the community, or in this congregation, that might be waiting for an invitation from you before they can cross their own borders and live into what God is dreaming for them?

And, the question for us, as a congregation, is how do we listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit and live into the future God is dreaming for us? Because if we listen to the voice of the Spirit, we need to be ready to be disrupted. We need to be ready to not control the outcome. We need to be ready for things to change and to be different.

And when boundaries seem to hard to overcome, when the walls that divide seem to be too great for us to break down, take heart that God's Spirit will not be limited by them as we are. God's Spirit will help us overcome. Some things, like the Holy Spirit, flaunt borders. Lizards can scale a wall without a thought. Butterflies float right over the top, riding on the wind currents. These walls that seem so insurmountable to us are not insurmountable to the Holy Spirit.

One way for us to listen for the voice of the Spirit as a community is to immerse ourselves in Scripture, trusting that the voice of our tradition will speak to us in new ways. On the 1st of June, we will be starting a congregation wide program of reading through the whole Bible in one year. We will be passing out Bibles in worship to kids who are 3rd grade and up and we hope that people of all ages will join in the readings, with parents reading the texts to younger kids.

I hope you will join us after worship on May 31, in 2 weeks, for the kick off celebration. The Parish Life Committee is planning a Pentecost brunch for that morning and we'll be passing out the participant's booklets with all of the readings. We will also have some Bibles for sale for adults who need them.

Throughout the year, we'll have opportunities to get together and discuss the readings. If you would like to help plan the events throughout the year, please talk with me.

In the final verses of our text this morning, the narrator makes an interesting comment. "Then they invited Peter to stay for several more days". The Spirit brings people together for relationship. I am thankful that the voice of the Spirit brought us together. And I am excited to discern the voice of the Spirit with you in the coming years.

Amen.