

Boundary Training

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Text: Mark 7:1-23

I wonder if you're as creeped out as I am to read the reminder prominently posted in the restrooms of restaurants that, "Employees must wash their hands before returning to work." The thought that my friendly waiter, with whom I am now on a first-name basis, needs to be reminded to wash his hands after using the facility doesn't exactly enhance my dining pleasure. And who's around to enforce this regulation? Is there a state inspector peering over the top of one of the stalls to make sure that the waiter is able to sing "Happy Birthday" all the way through while he soaps up and rinses off? And what about those times when I have discovered that there is no soap in the soap dispenser?

Today's passage from the Gospel of Mark seems eerily contemporary with those restaurant signs, but the odd twist is that in this account it's the Pharisees who seem to be the sensible ones. The Pharisees asked Jesus why it was that his disciples didn't wash their hands before eating. This wasn't a friendly question arising out of curiosity; it was an accusatory question, but it makes you almost sympathetic with the questioners. What kind of uncouth louts was Jesus hanging around with? They didn't wash their hands before eating?

But the regulations that Mark goes on to spell out, regulations that the disciples were flouting, had nothing to do with hygiene, although they no doubt served a hygienic purpose. This was long before the discovery of germs. In the Jewish tradition, meals were sacred occasions; they were times when faithful people were asked to remember that God is the provider of all that we need. The washing of hands was an act of ritual purification and preparation for an encounter with the holy; it was kind of

like of our asking for God's blessing upon our meals. The practice of hand-washing before meals was also similar to the Islamic practice of washing one's hands, face and feet before praying in the mosque. It's not just about cleanliness; it's about respect, and it's about boundaries, about being set apart from one's environment, about being consciously and proudly different.

For the people of Israel, boundaries were important. Throughout their long pilgrimage through history, their most persistent temptation was the temptation to assimilate, to fit in so fully with their environment that they became indistinguishable from their environment. In Egypt, they were tempted to adapt to the permanent status of being slaves—no freedom but steady meals as opposed to the uncertainties of the desert. In Canaan, they were tempted by the Canaanite gods, and by their royal patrons. Think about Ahab and Jezebel. During the Babylonian captivity, they were tempted to do what was necessary to survive in Babylon. Read the story of Esther and Mordechai. And in Jesus' time, the temptation was to acquiesce meekly to Roman rule, and worship the emperor, or to embrace Hellenism so fully that their unique commitment to the one God would be smothered by the heady mix of Greek philosophy and the many cults that flourished in the Hellenistic era.

Although we know the Pharisees through the critical lens of the gospel-writers, and they generally have a bad rep, in their own time the Pharisees were the defenders of the boundaries between the Jews and those who wanted them to disappear or to fit in so completely with their environment that they would be indistinguishable from it. The Pharisees were the boundary-setters, and the boundary-protectors. It was the Pharisees who realized that without the distinctive markers of Judaism—circumcision, ritual purity laws, dietary regulations—the Jews would become like everyone else and therefore would cease to be Jews. The Pharisees were the guardians of Jewish identity.

And, like it or not, we, all of us, do need boundaries in our lives. Every five years, pastors in the United Church of Christ are required to do what is called "boundary training." The training is meant, in part, to protect parishioners from the kind of boundary violations on the part of religious authorities that have plagued the church, the kind of abuses that make the newspapers, abuse that involve exploitation of authority on one side and vulnerability on the other side of the pastor-parishioner relationship.

Although I recognize its importance, I have never particularly enjoyed boundary training because it's a

sad reminder that the church is a human institution that is susceptible like every other to the consequences of sin.

But the boundaries are there to protect the people on both sides of the boundary line. People in professions other than the clergy can appreciate the need for boundaries between their professional and personal lives. Doctors, I'm reasonably sure, don't like to be asked about the best treatment for bunions by a stranger or even a friend or patient at a cocktail party. A clergy friend of mine used to dread taking long airline trips, because too often he had to lie to the person next to him on the plane about his profession. This was the result of too many extended religious discussions after his disclosure that he was a pastor. "I just want to sleep," was his plaint. He would just tell his neighbor that he was an insurance agent and then ask if their policy was up to date. "No one ever wants to pursue that one," he told me.

So boundaries play an important, and often healthy, role in our lives. They protect our integrity as individuals; they help us to keep from disappearing within our professions or within the categories to which we are assigned. And they help us to organize our lives in a way that enables us to maintain perspective on what is important, on what is personal and private, and on what is shared.

Our approaching holiday, Labor Day, is, in a way, a boundary day, a day that separates the more relaxed days of summer from what for some is the school year, what we in the church call the program year. For some of us, I would guess, Labor Day is a day of mixed feelings: regret for the summer that has passed too quickly, and anticipation of the year that lies ahead. Labor Day is the boundary between the two.

For Jews, and for many Christians before the time when stores were open on Sundays, the Sabbath functioned as that kind of boundary, and it was such an important boundary that it made it into the top ten list of commandments delivered by Moses after his conversation with God on Mt. Sinai. The Sabbath was to be kept holy, separate, apart. Keeping the Sabbath was a part of Jewish identity, and it still is for observant Jews. At the conclusion of the Sabbath, Jews observe what is called a service of separation, when they mark the transition from Sabbath rest to the workaday world. It is for them, and probably should be for us, the recognition of a boundary that can make our lives healthier.

But too often the means to a good end becomes the end in itself. Let me cite a humble example from my own boundary training experience. In our boundary training, we're told to be careful about hugging parishioners. Hugging can be misunderstood and it can be misused. In light of the possibility of abuse, and, again, the stuff in the newspapers, I can understand that boundary. But early on in my time as a pastor, fresh from a session of boundary training, I was confronted with a profoundly distraught parishioner, someone who really needed a hug, and it seemed to me that the prescribed boundary was not functioning in that situation as it was intended to function. It was getting in the way of a greater good, which was to provide comfort and support to someone who needed it at that moment. And so hug we did.

Jesus had a problem not with the idea of boundaries, but with the way the Pharisees had transformed them from a means to an end. They had come to regard boundary setting and boundary protection as the essence of faith, while Jesus saw these things as the facilitators of faith. The Pharisees, after all, didn't just challenge Jesus about his disciples' failure to wash their hands before eating; they had earlier taken him on about breaching the Sabbath in order to heal a man who had a withered hand. "Don't you know that you're not supposed to work on the Sabbath?" they asked him. "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath," was his response. He wasn't challenging the validity of observing the Sabbath; he was putting the Sabbath back into proper perspective and reminding people that rest, and that the boundary between work and rest and worship are gifts of God meant not to encumber us, but to free us to be faithful and happy people, and those two things do go together.

The church has had its own issues with boundaries. I used to see them at ecumenical gatherings when we would do everything together except the most important thing, which was to affirm our unity at the Lord's Supper. But instead, there was the boundary separating people who understood the sacrament in different ways, and so could not find a way to share it. I have seen the boundaries when I've been asked to do a funeral or a graveside service for someone who wasn't a member of the church I was serving, but had been denied a church funeral in their own church because they had transgressed one of the boundaries laid down in that church's doctrine or practice. Even religion itself can be an idolatrous boundary when it gets in the way of faithfulness, when we begin to worship religion at the expense of the God to whom religion should always point.

It isn't what goes into you that causes the problem, Jesus told the Pharisees, it's what comes out of you. To turn a popular phrase on its head, you really aren't what you eat, you are what you hold in your heart, you are what your heart leads you to do. And sometimes, as important as the boundaries of our lives may be, the ethic of love requires that we go beyond them in faithfulness to God. The physician may not need to deliver a prescription for bunions at a party, but she may need to be a Good Samaritan doctor at an accident site. Boundaries, as useful as they are, are situational.

In this church, we respect boundaries. We've made ourselves a safe sanctuary church for our children, for example, and as awkward and intrusive as the rules we've laid down for ourselves sometimes seem to be, we follow them to make sure that our children are protected. And yes, we observe the important boundaries around the relationship between pastor and parishioner.

But sometimes we do need a hug. Jesus reached across the boundaries to embrace those who needed a hug, who needed to be reminded that they, too, were children of a loving God--regardless of the boundaries. Amen.