

“In-right Outright”
1 Corinthians 6:1-8, 12-13
January 17, 2021
Rev. David Hutchinson

Have you ever known someone who had what we call, “bad boundaries”?

There are lots of forms of the condition:

Physical boundaries, emotional boundaries, verbal boundaries...

Some people talk too much, some people hug too much, some people tell you too much information about themselves, which is where the abbreviation “TMI” comes from, meaning “Too Much Information”.

The problem with this condition, usually, is that it is disrespectful of others.

Normal boundaries are intended for the health and happiness of others.

So to have bad boundaries - - hurts others - - on some level.

Sometimes it’s not so bad and other times it’s horrible.

Sometimes the person can’t really help it, other times it’s predatory.

But when the condition gets problematic is - - when it disrupts our relationships.

Bad boundaries can - - upset social relationships - - and keep things from working right.

This knock-knock joke illustrates my point.

Hopefully Gina will help me out here...

“Knock-knock...”

(“Who’s there?”)

“Control freak – ok now you say ‘control freak who?’”

You see what I mean - - it messes up the joke.

Bad boundaries...

I bring up all this unpleasantness for a couple of reasons...

My reasons are these:

1. Paul wrote about appropriate boundaries in the Christian community

It's the Bible reading for this morning

2. We have been observing enhanced and altered boundaries for the past year

COVID guidelines and masks and social distancing are all boundaries

3. The boundaries of our democracy were breached by rioters last week

What happened in Washington DC was a terrible case of this condition.

At its worst this sort of thing could destroy our republic.

4. My job as preacher is, on some level, to bring up unpleasant but helpful things

And so - - it seems like this might be - - a time to get a lesson from the Bible that's helpful - - and would otherwise be even MORE unpleasant - - but since we've been going through all this anyway - - maybe we can let it help us hear the Bible more clearly on this point.

Does that make sense?

So let's start with Paul and the Bible.

According to Paul, judgment and boundaries go together. / Paul is pretty clear that there IS judgment for wickedness and immorality - - and BECAUSE judgment is important - - it needs appropriate boundaries.

According to Paul - - it's not good if everyone judges everyone.

AND according to Paul - - there needs to be judgment for wrong.

Paul focuses on legal matters and court cases.

Paul advises followers of Jesus and those who are part of the church - - to try to resolve their differences within the church.

Instead of bringing lawsuit after lawsuit in SECULAR courts OUTSIDE the boundary of the church - - the church needs to JUDGE the behavior of others in the church - - so that we can help each other get our act together. / So what would it look like if instead of a string of lawsuits that go nowhere - - we got our act together and examined our own behavior?

That is Paul's question in the Bible.

Which means TWO things: We should try to avoid judging others who are different from ourselves if we can - - AND - - we have to judge, as best we can, those closest to us.

That's a pretty tall order.

But it doesn't come out of nowhere.

Paul brings it up because the people in the church in Corinth are doing the OPPOSITE and it is making things worse. / What was happening was that people were airing their dirty laundry and their arguments in secular courts - - and meanwhile they were letting people act with corruption and immorality inside the church. / SO instead of keeping corruption outside and their arguments inside - - they were letting corruption inside - - and taking their arguments on the road.

It was a bad case - - of bad boundaries.

You can guess what the result was - - in terms of public opinion...

People in Corinth who were not a part of the church - - didn't want to be.

The basic point of Paul's argument is to encourage people to take responsibility for themselves first - - and he writes, "just because you CAN lawfully do something - - doesn't mean you SHOULD". / The question is - - what helps others the most?

In the arena of judgment - - judging others who are different - - is mostly left to God.

Instead - - Paul urges - - use your judgment on yourselves first.

Which is important - - IF - - you really believe God's judgment is coming some day.

IF you really believe God judges between good and bad - - then God will.

You don't have to do God's job.

But you DO have to do your own.

That's Paul's stance.

The question Paul's letter in the Bible raises for me is: who judges who - - and when?

It's a difficult question to answer.

And it needs to be done prayerfully, it seems to me.

But - - it is important to ask the question - - and to answer it for ourselves.

And it is - - in part a boundary question.

This past year we have had a lot of practice - - thinking about boundaries.

Masks and social distancing - - have been debated in the arena of public health - - and the arena of personal rights. / Paul advises followers of Jesus to put the welfare of others - - ahead of your lawful rights - - if what you do will harm another.

"All things are lawful - - but not all things are helpful" he writes.

The question is - - how can we return to an agreed upon commitment - - to one another?

Imagine if we did.

In the political realm again - - the key question is how do we work for the good of others - - and support the good of the whole. / The common good. / How can we as Americans look at ourselves first. / Can we hold one another accountable on the world stage?

Remember that old grammar school or Bible school song, "Down-right Upright"?

"I'm downright upright in-right outright happy all the time."

It's a pretty simple song, but one line diverges . . . in the various versions:

It is not totally clear WHAT or WHO makes these singing kids happy.

Some versions suggest making a lot of friends, or going to camp.

But the Sunday School version says it is Jesus cleansing us from sin.

Essentially judging us.

But that religious version was not deemed appropriate for those outside the church.

So - - probably rightly - - the words were changed to protect - - the outsiders.

Judgment for sin - - and then cleansing - - was reserved for Sunday School.

And it made us all downright upright in-right outright happy all the time!

My point is that this boundary stuff is everywhere.

And I DO think it is important to get it right.

Because we have to live together in this world - - with lots of kinds of people.

Being all alone - - and perfect - - is not a really great option.

Being right - - in your opinion - - is not being right.

You could live that way.

But do you want to?

Maya Angelou asks that question in her poem: "Alone"

"Lying, thinking

Last night

How to find my soul a home...

Where water is not thirsty

And bread loaf is not stone

I came up with ONE thing.

And I don't believe I'm wrong:

I don't believe I'm wrong:

That nobody, but nobody,

Can make it out there - - alone."

"Alone - - all alone

Nobody but nobody

Can make it out there alone."

"There are some millionaires

With money they can't use

Their wives run around like banshees

Their children sing the blues.

They've got expensive doctors

To cure their hearts of stone.

But nobody - - no - - nobody... can make it out there alone."

So in response to Maya Angelou - - and Paul...

I think the boundary issue - - is a togetherness issue.

I think the issue of judgment - - is a togetherness issue.

I think the mask and vaccine issue - - is a togetherness issue.

I think the lawsuit issue - - is a togetherness issue.

Paul says that until we get our in-right and outright lives in order...

We can't really expect to be downright upright people.

And IF we really want to be downright upright - -

- - we need to be in-right with ourselves...

- - and outright toward others.

I'm pretty sure Paul wasn't happy all the time.

I'm pretty sure the people in the church in Corinth weren't happy all the time either.

I'm pretty sure WE - - are not happy all the time.

Maybe this scripture reading - - helps us understand a bit more about why.

Paul reminds us - - in the middle of all this - - that God raised Jesus Christ.

God raised Jesus - - and wants to raise us too.

That's the good news.

Do you want to rise above the sadness of the world?

Do you want to rise above the corruption and negativity of the world?

God's promise to us is: we can.

May it be so.

Amen.