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“Spotlight on the early church: Moving fences and building bridges”

In the past weeks, we have been exploring during Pride Month how the early church was challenged to adjust and expand in ways as they faced new challenges. Today is no different.

But first, we are going to pass the offering plate now. So that “no one has too much, and no one has too little.” That’s how this passage goes. Help is being asked from one congregation to help another congregation. The Corinth church consumed by its inward fighting was being challenged them to live beyond themselves by moving fences and building bridges.

Moving Fences

During World War II a Protestant chaplain with the American troops in Italy became a friend of a local Roman Catholic priest. In time, the chaplain moved on with his unit and was killed in combat. The priest heard of his death, and knowing that the chaplain had no close family back in the States, he asked the military authorities if the chaplain could be buried in the cemetery behind his church. Permission was granted.

But the priest ran into a problem with his own church authorities. They were sympathetic, but they said they could not approve the burial of a non-Catholic in a Catholic cemetery. So, the priest buried his friend just outside the cemetery fence.

Years later, an Army veteran and friend of that chaplain returned to Italy and visited the old priest. He asked to see the chaplain's grave. To his surprise he found the grave inside the cemetery fence. “Ah,” he said to the priest, “I see that you got permission to move the body.” “No,” said the priest. “They told me where I couldn't bury the body. But nobody ever told me I couldn't move the fence.”

Jesus moved fences this way:

A rich young man came to Jesus with a question. He asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus summed up the 10 commands into 2. “Love God with all your being, and your neighbor as yourself.” “I have done this from my youth”, the rich man said. “One thing you lack”, Jesus said, “Go sell all you have, then come follow me.” The young man went away sad. Jesus moved fences on what and who we love.

There was a day when a group of religious people came to Jesus with a woman that they had caught committing adultery. [I thought this was an act that took 2 to commit. Where is the other half?] By Jewish law this woman must be stoned to death. By Roman law only the Roman leaders could take a life. Jesus was in a tough spot, either action would get him in trouble or humiliated. Jesus said to the accusers, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” Jesus then knelt and began to write in the sand. One by one the accusers left. Jesus asked the embarrassed woman, “Where are your accusers?” “They have all gone,” she replied. “I don’t

accuse you," Jesus said. "Go and sin no more." Jesus moved fences for those guilty of failing societal rules.

We Christians must always be moving fences for the glory of God. We are compelled to break down barriers. We are bridge builders between persons, groups, and nations. Always, we try to enlarge the circle of understanding and concern.

Building bridges

There were two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in their 40 years of working together. It began with a small misunderstanding, and grew into a major difference, and finally exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence. One morning, there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there that I could help with?"

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my younger brother! Last week, there was a meadow between us, but he took his bulldozer and dug a small river between us. Well I'm going to do him one better. See that pile of old lumber? I want you to build an 8 foot high fence between us. Then I won't need to see his place or his face anymore." The carpenter said, "Show me the nails and the tools, and I'll do a good job for you."

The older brother had to go to town, so he left for the day. At sunset, when he returned, his eyes opened wide, and his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. The carpenter had built a bridge that stretched from one side of the river to the other, with handrails and all! And his younger brother, was coming toward them, his handout stretched. "You're quite the guy," he said, "after all I've said and done." The two brothers met in the middle, and shook each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter leaving. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother. "I'd love to," the carpenter said, "but I have many more bridges to build."

I could cite the two examples of Jesus summing the law into to commands and the woman caught in adultery again as ways that Jesus built bridges. Rather than doing that, let me say this instead:

Bridges built to the LBGTQIA+ community

You have by allowing me to speak as freely as I have during Pride Month. In my nearly 40 year preaching career, I have never had the freedom that you have extended me since coming to Plymouth. Thank you!

We have family and friends who are LBGTQIA+. They have told us their story of who they are, born that way, they tried to be different in order to be accepted and found they couldn't be false. They had to be themselves.

You have shown grace to them by loving them as they are, for who they are. You have shown me grace to accept me as I am: I am bald (I didn't choose to be bald!), I am 6 feet tall (I didn't choose to be this tall/short!), I am right handed (I didn't choose that my right side would be my dominate side!). The LBGTQIA+ community did not ask to be who they are!

In order to stand for the LBGTQIA+ community, stand with them, we go back to the beginning. Yes, to the book of Genesis. In the beginning we were made by God and called "Good!"

The LGBTQIA+ community is under attack from individuals, from law makers and government. We must stand with them and for them. They need our help to survive.

When you and I come to the end of our days, just remember this: God won't ask what kind of car we drove, but God will ask how many people we helped get where they needed to go. God won't ask how big our house was, but God will ask how many people we welcomed into our home. God won't ask what neighborhood we lived in, but God will ask how we treated our neighbors. And God will ask how many fences we moved and how many bridges we built.

Start small

Charles Eliet had a problem. He had a contract to build an engineering marvel--a suspension bridge over the Niagra River. But he had no way of stretching his first cable between the shores. Any boat that tried to cross the falls would be swept over. Then Eliet hit on an idea. If a kite carrying a string could be flown across the river, the string could become a cord, the cord could then be used to pull larger cables across. So Eliet announced a kite-flying contest, and a young man named Homan Walsh responded. On Walsh's first attempt the kite's string broke when it caught in the river's ice, but on his next try he succeeded in flying his kite to the opposite shore of the river. The vital link was established, and the bridge built.

I want us to be known for moving fences.

I want us to be known for building bridges.

I want us to remember to start small.