

Greenhills Community Church, Presbyterian

June 19, 2022,

BOUNDARIES, BARRIERS, AND BREAKTHROUGHS

**Elder Lee
Sanders, REPI**

Galatians 3:23-39, I Kings 19:1-15, Luke 8:26-39
(Juneteenth)

There's a lot going on in the three scriptures you have just heard, but here's the spoiler: God's grace, God's love, can cross any boundary, can penetrate any barrier that we humans try to build. Let's see how these very different passages all bring us to the breakthrough.

In the story from I Kings, Elijah is in a bad place. He has just been in battle with all the prophets of Baal, the god supported by Jezebel, wife of King Ahab. And he has beaten them. But now he is a wanted man. Jezebel is out to get him, and he believes he is the only one left on the side of Yahweh. He's scared, and he has fled into the wilderness. He's definitely out of his comfort zone. He is practiced in listening to God, but right now, he's just not hearing anything. And he's feeling a bit sorry for himself; he's discouraged; and he just wants to give up and die. He asks God to just "kill me now" rather than wait on Jezebel to do it her way. Instead, God provides sustenance—Elijah fell asleep and when he awoke, he finds that an angel has left both food and drink for him, saying "Get up and eat." He does, but then falls asleep again. A second time, an angel wakes him saying, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." And that food lasts him 40 days and 40 nights on his journey through the desert to Mt. Horeb. Remember that the Hebrews used the number 40 to mean "a long, hard time of it" rather than specifically 40 days. So we know it was a very difficult journey. Mt. Horeb is also known as Mt. Sinai. This is a holy place, sometimes known as a "thin place" where the boundary between the human and divine is "thinner" than usual, more permeable, where it is easier to be in touch with the divine. This is where Moses met God, and where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments, among other messages.

Have you experienced a "thin place" in your life? For some, it is a mountain top, for others, the beach; for some it is found in stillness and for others it is in motion. Elijah went to this holy place known to his people, and found a cave where he could spend the night.

We know that God communicates with humans in a wide variety of ways—in dramatic ways and in subtle ways. I don't know about you, but whenever I've been wanting or needing guidance from God, I've always wished for that big neon sign to come along that clearly directs me along the right path. Again, I don't know about your experiences, but for me it doesn't often happen like that. But since Elijah was used to listening, he was alert when God asked him, in the door of that cave, "What are you doing here?" Elijah replies, "I've been doing all the right things, Lord, following your commands, but the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and killed your prophets. I'm the only one left, and they want to kill me!" God replies by telling Elijah to go stand on the mountain because the Lord is about to pass by. Shortly, here comes a great wind, strong enough to split mountains and break rocks (imagine that power compared even to what we saw here last week!). But the Lord was not in the wind. Then came an earthquake, and we know earthquakes are strong enough to change the course of a river. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. The earthquake was followed by a huge fire (imagine the western forest fires), but the Lord was not there either. After the fire, there was only silence. When Elijah noticed that, he wrapped his face in his mantle and stood in the entrance of the cave. After all, he has been God's prophet for a while now, and he sensed that God was near. A voice spoke to him saying, once again, "What are you doing here?" Elijah, very human, repeats his whine from earlier—"I've done my best, but I'm the only one left and they want to kill me!" The Lord replies, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and anoint Hazael king."

Notice that God does not tell Elijah he “shouldn’t feel that way;” doesn’t reprimand him. But God makes it clear that there is something for Elijah to do and that it is time to go do it. The time for self-pity is over. Elijah has seen God’s power, and has received God’s sustaining food, and to his credit, he goes. Clearly, it is okay to be discouraged, but it is not okay to give up. We are not alone, and there is work to be done.

Now let’s fast-forward about 900 years, to the time of Jesus. This is another story full of vivid images. One of the key things to note is that Jesus leaves his own territory and crosses the lake, to the “opposite side,” into the Gerasene district—this is Gentile territory. It is a geographic and political boundary, significantly, and Luke uses this to tell us that no one is beyond the reach of Christ’s redeeming healing love. The man that Jesus and his disciples meet there is a man who has lost himself. He is totally cut off from himself and others because of the demons inside him. He doesn’t even know his own name. He’s homeless, he’s naked, he’s unclean. He is the ultimate outcast. But Jesus doesn’t fear him, doesn’t look down on him, doesn’t tell him to go away and clean up, doesn’t say, “he’s not a Jew, so let’s just pass on by—we’ll let his own people take care of him.” No one would have blamed him if he had. But Jesus saw the desperate need, the pain in this man, and calls out the demons. The demons recognize Jesus’ power and beg him not to send them back into the abyss, that is, destruction. Jesus lets them go into a herd of pigs, which they then run off the cliff into the lake! You can imagine how the pig herders reacted. Their livelihood had just been destroyed! They told everyone in town, who came out to see what was going on. They saw the man, his life completely reversed, now with clothes on and sitting at Jesus’ feet. It scared them and they asked Jesus to leave the area, which he did. (You will remember that Jesus never stayed in places where he was not wanted.) The newly healed man asked to go with Jesus, but Jesus told him to go home and tell people what God had done for him. And he did—he became the first disciple to the Gentiles! Jesus ignored the boundaries, the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. He saw only the need for wholeness in that beleaguered man, and he broke through the barriers of race and nationality to heal him. Jesus’ presence (think of it as the ultimate “thin place”) and power disrupt the social order. That sort of power is not what any of us are used to, and it can be scary to think about. But breaking down barriers between people is exactly what we are called to do, and it is one way in which healing begins for us and for others.

Elijah feels, like each of us probably does at some point, separated from God, tempted to give up on himself and his ministry. But even then, God feeds, nurtures Elijah. God reminds Elijah that he is not really alone (note the displays of God’s power) and then sends him on his way, with an assignment. Our Gerasene man is definitely cut off from people and from God; he is being controlled by a legion of demons. Jesus restores the man’s humanity, his wholeness, and then gives him a job to do as well. If the man had gone with Jesus, no one in his community would ever really know what had happened. Rumors might circulate, but with no real evidence. The man would probably be forgotten. But if he stays in his home area, he has the opportunity to demonstrate the change that has taken place, to remind people of what he had been, and to tell what God had done for him—a very powerful witness. BREAK God’s grace and love will not let boundaries or barriers stop God from making all things new. What are our boundaries and barriers? Paul, in Galatians, names a few from his time: race (Jew vs. Gentile), gender, social status (slave vs. free). We might add a few from our own, that is, categories that tend to separate us from one another:

- US born or undocumented immigrant
- Monied or working class or poor
- Skin color
- Political party
- Denomination
- Sexual orientation
- And sometimes, whichever college or pro team you root for

Paul is saying that these human distinctions break down because none of us can stand on our own—we all need to be “clothed in Christ.” This does not eliminate the distinctions but puts them far behind our identity as part of the family of God. The distinctions lack significance for our faith. There are many distinct Christians, but one church, the Body of Christ. We are all uniquely and wonderfully created, but we are all part of God’s family.

Another way to say that is that the most profound differences between people (to Paul and to us) are nothing compared to the power of Christ to reconcile all things. Christ has made one body out of an infinitely varied tapestry of believers.

What’s the bottom line, the Good News? Christ has made the breakthrough for us; God continues to nurture and heal us, even when we feel separated; and we have an assignment, just like Elijah and the Gerasene man—we are to live as though the previous divisive distinctions do not exist. We must not let them create barriers between us and others. We are to actively demonstrate that “God welcomes all, strangers and friends. God’s love is strong, and it never ends.”