

The Third Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Acts 10

Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

Wish you had been with me when I walked down a residential street earlier this week. There was a house with a lovely wooden fence around it's back and side yard. I wanted you there to laugh with me. Because posted along this fence were the manufacturers signs that read, "Invisible fence." I stopped in my tracks. Looked around to see if someone was playing a joke. "Invisible fence?" "No, you're not," I said, each time I saw the sign, "I can see you. You're not invisible."

Are you acquainted with invisible fences? They are designed to contain dogs in yards without putting up any metal or wooden fences. There are two parts to an invisible fence: a wire buried along the desired boundary and a dog collar that sounds whenever the boundary is approached. The dog learns the boundaries several ways. The dog can hear an audible cue from the collar whenever she approached the buried boundary and if he would cross it, the dog gets a mildly unpleasant tingling sensation from the collar. So with practice and conditioning, the dog learns to stay in the safety of their own yard. Crossing the invisible fence becomes repulsive to the dog.¹

The thing is, most of us have our own invisible fences that we won't cross. We haven't been trained by collars that sound or zap us. But we have been conditioned by the attitudes and opinions of those who raised us, those we admire or consider an authority, the media we've been exposed to and, of course, our own life experiences. Consciously or unconsciously we keep within boundaries — avoiding certain circumstances, areas, people or possibilities. Some of those boundaries keep us safe — walking by yourself at night down certain streets in any city is not advisable. Some of those invisible fences — like laws — keep us from doing stupid or harmful things. But there are other boundaries that are not about safety but firmly establishing a line between "us and them." "Us" being the ones who are okay and good and "them" who are not.

It was one of those “us and them” invisible fences that the apostle Peter began to encounter on that roof top in Joppa. He was praying and hungry. In a trance he saw a tablecloth come before him with animals forbidden by the dietary laws of Judaism. When a heavenly voice told him to kill and eat one of those creatures, it was like the audible alarm and electric shock going off in one of those invisible fence collars. The very idea was repulsive. “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” Peter was further confused by the response, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

We may wonder, “What’s the big deal?” But to the Hebrew people it was a big deal. Following the dietary laws set out in Scripture and refusing to share meals with gentiles was not just about food. Under consistent pressure to forsake their faith practices to become like everyone else, obeying and following the Judaic codes was a matter of maintaining their God-given identity and the very survival of their minority community among other dominant nations. The traditions and laws about foods and table fellowship were thought to be a divinely ordained invisible fence to preserve Israel’s calling, providing boundaries from the temptation to over assimilate or overly compromise. On that roof top Peter is being posed a baffling dilemma. All his life he thought to be faithful to God meant following this particular God-given rules. Was he wrong about that or was God changing the rules? And how would he know?

While Peter’s puzzling, the Spirit points out the men sent by Cornelius searching for him. Peter’s told to go with these gentiles without hesitation for they were sent by God. To obey God’s command and later, to enter the gentile Cornelius’s house was stepping over that invisible fence. “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone Profane or unclean.” After he hears Cornelius tell of his own vision and obedience to God, Peter makes the radical statement, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality . . .” Where has the fence gone? Before Peter can even finish his sermon, the Holy Spirit falls upon these

gentiles. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit?”

God had thrown open the whole fence between Jewish-Christians and Gentiles. Through Christ it was not just those of Jewish faith that were to be part of God’s kingdom but all people — Jew and gentile, men and women, healthy and sick, Roman or Ethiopian, rich or poor. God was up to more than they had understood. Peter and those early Jewish disciples of Jesus were being led by God into a radical, startling, new way of thinking and living. They had to decide whether to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit or stay behind a fence that would now be of their own making. Or, as William Willimon writes, “Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, “What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?”² God is often jumping our fences and telling us to take them down.

I attended a memorial service for Pastor Joe Donovan’s wife yesterday at Mt. St. Mary’s University, where she had worked as a counselor for the last ten years. It wasn’t in a chapel but a seminarian dining hall. There was a row of Lutheran clergy, Bishop Herz-Lang and some people from Trinity Lutheran in Boonsboro, where Pastor Donovan serves. There were probably even more staff, students and alums from the university who had been touch by Linda’s counseling ministry there. Family and friends spoke about Linda and one even played guitar and sang. John’s Easter story was read and a sermon of resurrection hope and comfort preached. It was a gathering that ignored any fences between church and academia, religious and secular and God was most certainly present.

Earlier I had seen another holy, fence-defying scene in which that often perceived boundary between people in a church and those outside seemed to vanish. Haven went outside to be with our neighbors. We invited people to set up tables and sell their stuff. We invited conversations over baked goods and coffee. We engage in friendly banter and exchanged personal gems about family or life as folks looked over yard sale items. People meet as they oohed over a cute babies or ahhed over a sweet pet. People weren’t captive

in categories, stereotypes or labels. Just children of God sharing a beautiful day. It was like watching the kingdom of God open its arms and say, “come on down” and we all were happy for the chance.

Pastor Richard Game likes to tell the story about his dog Bailey who lived for many happy years within the boundaries of their back yard and its invisible fence. That is until the Snowmageddon blizzard of January 2011 that shut down Atlanta for a week. The first day of the blizzard he received a telephone call from a neighbor at about 9:30 in the morning. Bailey had escaped. Why this time and not on other snow days? Well, this time school had closed. And that morning children--including his own--were whizzing down the best sledding run in the neighborhood, which happens to be located in their side yard, just beyond the invisible fence. The blanket of snow from the heavens obscured the boundary of the yard, as it had on other snow days. But what caused Bailey to cross on that day were children at play. “As was true for Peter, and for me, and is true for you as well,” Pastor Games writes, “real live human beings – children in this case--caused Bailey to cross over. I had to laugh that morning as I found Bailey unbounded and happy and carefree, romping and running and chasing the sledders as they sped along. That seems to me a lot like God's own joy available for us, too, on the other side of our invisible fences.”³

That's the funny thing about trying to keep up with God's redemptive work. It can seem a bit scary or just strange to cross over boundaries we've placed between ourselves and others. But when you're following the Holy Spirit you will find an unexpected freedom and surprising joy. Where are you being called? Over what boundaries is God beckoning Haven to cross. Lord, open our eyes that we may see you and our hearts that we might believe as you ask us to cross over the invisible fences that separate us from each other and enter into new possibilities to be your love in flesh. Amen. Linda M Alessandri 4/18/15

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Game, "Peter's Invisible Fence" April 28, 2013 posted on Day1.org

2. William H. Willimon, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts Atlanta: John Knox Press 1988 p. 99

3. Richard Game, "Peter's Invisible Fence" April 28, 2013 posted on Day1.org