

Border Links a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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Jeremiah 31: 31-34 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more

Luke 17.11-19 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ Then he said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’

BORDERLINKS is a bi-national non-profit Presbyterian-related group that was founded by former PCUSA Moderator Rev. John Fife and more recent Moderator Rick Ufford Chase. With a multinational staff and headquarters on either side of the US-Mexico border, it offers unique educational and experiential seminars about border issues. While teaching North Americans the evils of exploitation, BorderLinks actively examines global economy, free trade, NAFTA, international debt, micro credit programs, community banking, labor conditions, and environmental problems. The group also addresses social issues such as politics, women’s rights, immigration policy, the US Border Patrol, crime, health concerns, and human rights.

A border – any border – is a line of demarcation, a fixed limit between two demonstrably different entities. Borders generally mean polarity, separation. Borders between nations are places where change is constant as people move back and forth and take their ideas and traditions with them. They are places of tension, between cultures, between governments, between languages. Yet they are places of significance and possibility.

It is perhaps no accident that the healing in today’s scripture takes place on a border. Jesus was between Galilee and Samaria, an area normally avoided by self-respecting Jews. Although the Samaritans were descended from a group of Israelite inhabitants, and remained steadfast adherents to the Torah, the Samaritans did not claim the temple as their sacred worship site, nor did they interpret Scriptures in precisely the same ways. Samaritans and Jews worshipped the same God, but they each considered themselves the true followers of Yahweh. The two groups avoided if not hated one another. Yet on this very border Jesus once talked to a Samaritan woman, and changed his mind for a

Samaritan petitioner, and now he heals a Samaritan leper. Jesus makes a border link and says, come, you too can reach across a divide.

Geographic borders are obvious places for reaching and healing. Whether it is Mexico and Texas, Palestine and Israel, China and Tibet, peacemaking requires reaching. One natural by-product is that when we cross the border, either by choice or because circumstances require it, we automatically become the outsider. As the newcomer or stranger, it gives us a chance to reflect on our role as insider. When we have to function within a foreign system, it often helps us sort out ways we are blind or thoughtless or judgmental or cruel back home.

Not all borders are geographic. There are equally distinctive borders around the ways we do or don't practice our faith, or even what kind of faith we claim to have. Our judgments and borders around those of other faiths are suspicious at best, antagonistic at worst. And delineations within faiths are equally strong and often harsh. There was the original Christian East West split, and today Catholics and Protestants have boundaries that are brick walls. Even among denominations, the progressive and the fundamental viewpoints are poles apart.

Yet Gospel writer Luke describes the ministry of Jesus and then the early church as places where all kinds of outsiders were welcome, especially Gentiles and Samaritans. The Samaritan leper is living breathing proof that outsiders are welcome as Jesus' disciples – even that outsiders can teach us something about authentic saving faith.

As a congregation, we're currently pursuing a linking of some borders that most consider to be irreconcilable. As most of you know, we are exploring the possibility of inviting a Jewish congregation and a Muslim congregation to make their worship homes in this building – perhaps even sharing this one sanctuary space.

Can it be done? The Members of Center for Spiritual Community are excited about it, optimistic. But we know it won't be easy. We have been talking about the effort in Fremont where an existing mosque invited a synagogue and a Christian church to share the property. It did not work for the Jewish congregation. And to date, three years later, and the only thing the Christian church and the mosque manage to share is the parking lot! Even sharing bathrooms has proved an insurmountable obstacle.

Our border link challenge will be setting up a viable interfaith model, determining how we can share space. But the more significant challenge may well be how we as a church community respond to this challenge, how we might incorporate and claim the vision, how we might deal with this change of mission and of identity. We seem to be called to this – Your Board certainly feels it is a God thing! If so, is this a border link that we all might be able to embrace, to live into?

Why do you suppose it was the Samaritan who, in the end, received not just a cure but a genuine healing, a restoration to wholeness? I think it is because he did more than simply follow the rules. The nine who trooped up to the priest were probably grateful as well. But they went to reclaim their communities and their lives. The Samaritan, the outsider, recognized that in reaching across borders, national and religious borders, borders of illness, stigma and exclusion, borders of culture; Jesus opened doors to unexpected

opportunity. God was doing a new thing. Jesus was not simply fixing up old lives, but offering new ones. The Samaritan realized that the miracle was about a wholeness, a salvation, that is far beyond the actual healing.

After all, he was still a Samaritan, a foreigner, traditionally distrusted and excluded. If he hadn't been ill, the other lepers have had no dealings with him. The common tragedy, the mutual misery, drew them together, without it, his friends will undoubtedly desert him. The Samaritan must turn back and face his life. But somehow the Scriptures convey that it will be different, have a new quality. His joyful gratitude, his worship, tells us the he has indeed been transformed, made well.

The group BorderLinks has never tried to deny that a genuine border exists between Mexico and the U.S. It does not wish to destroy the border. It simply wants to lead us into greater understanding and cooperation. It tries to permeate them, to make the borders less impervious, to create dialogue and interaction and cooperation and understanding so that each side can learn from and live with the other.

In the passage from Jeremiah, God promises a new covenant. In fact, it is the only time in the Hebrew Testament that a covenant is described as new. Up until this point, God has done new things in an effort to enact the established covenant. Time and time again, the people resisted. They forgot. They worshipped other gods. They failed to care for the poor and needy. Now God offers a new promise. A new covenant -- not written in stone that can be broken and set aside, but rather branded in the heart. God's people will live out God's law of love, not because it is the law of the land, not because it is their duty, but because their hearts are shaped that way. It is a border link.

At the end of the day, Jeremiah tells us, we may find that the remaining options for doing it our way, and using our habitual ways of providing security, are running out. We may come to the end of what our problem-solving brilliance, our arms, our defenses, our diplomacy and our national gods have to offer us; we learn the limits to what they can accomplish. Then it may be that our hearts turn, and we learn once again that only putting our trust in a Loving Presence that is beyond ourselves can carry us through.

The lessons today remind us that God is with us, which is significantly different than God is on our side! God is with us, just waiting to be found. And God may just be on both sides of the borders we erect in our lives. As Jesus ministers on the border of Samaria and Galilee he demonstrates peacemaking at its highest. This week, what impossible thing will you ask for? How will you recognize the possibilities and trust God with the outcomes? For what will you fall down with thanksgiving? What borders will you link this week?