

Boundary Crossing

[Hebrews 12:18-29](#)

[Luke 13:10-17](#)

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine was talking about some of the choices he is making in his life and he told me, “Right now I’m self-absorbed in my spirituality.” “Right now I’m self-absorbed in my spirituality.”

I’m going to leave you with that thought for a moment while I talk about the second reading this morning, the one from the Letter to the Hebrews. It’s a pretty confusing reading because we are thrown in at the deep end without any context for what is being said. Scholars don’t know who wrote Hebrews but it seems that it was written for Jewish Christians who were beginning to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah, perhaps because he was not a political leader. The writer explains the work of Jesus with constant reference to the Jewish faith using the imagery of priesthood and sacrifice.

So the passage from this morning contrasts our experience as followers of Jesus with that of the ancient Hebrew people at the time of Moses. Rather than their physical experiences of God manifesting in the desert and at Mount Sinai, we have an unseen but none the less glorious vision – we “have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering...”

This vision is one of the reign of God where all creation is made new and all beings live in harmony. It is a communal vision, not one based on individual, personal experience.

Which brings me back to my friend “self-absorbed in his spirituality”. I know what he was trying to say – that at present he is going through an intense period of inner work which takes time and attention. I certainly

honor that. We all need times of focused attention on our relationship with God. Yet spirituality in the footsteps of Jesus can never leave us self-absorbed, because for Jesus, spirituality is all about bringing the reign of God near, and that means a life of service to God and to our neighbor.

It can be easy for us to get caught up in the infra-structure of our communal life and lose touch with the bigger picture. I can fret about the position of the lectern or about who did not adequately clean the circular tables and lose sight of the fact that this is not about me and my preferences but about serving and worshiping God to the best of our abilities. We can become self-absorbed in our own way of doing church and lose sight of the people who don't share our culture and our history. This rapidly becomes a failure of hospitality as we expect everyone to instantly know how things work.

Coming to an Episcopal church is for many people an entirely new world – a bit like being thrown into that reading from Hebrews. As we seek to welcome visitors, part of our hospitality is letting go of the way we do things in order to step over the boundary of us and them and find our common humanity in Christ. And part of our growing as a faith community that embraces diversity is accepting and finding the joy in new expressions, different music, unfamiliar words.

The leader of the synagogue in today's Gospel reading was stuck in the way things should be. He "kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."" Jesus was not hidebound by the way things ought to be done – he saw the woman's need and he responded with compassion and love. He crossed the artificial boundary of the Sabbath in order to bring healing.

We live in a time when boundaries and borders are being emphasized. When people are starting to fear for their lives because they are in some way different. The El Paso shooter had posted an anti-immigrant diatribe shortly before he killed 20 people in Walmart. Last week a transgender woman was assaulted at a motel in San Luis Obispo. White supremacists are being emboldened by the culture of attack and blaming. Racism is alive and well and growing.

Yet we are members of the Jesus movement – the Messiah who was not a military leader but instead preached reconciliation and who reached out across religious and ethnic boundaries. As Hebrews says we are followers of "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and [we have come] to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Let's unpack that statement.

Back in Genesis, in the early Hebrew description of how the world came to be the place it is, there was a dispute between the two brothers Cain and Abel. Cain was a farmer, Abel a shepherd. For some unspecified reason, they believed that God accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's. In his anger and disappointment, Cain murdered his brother. God said to Cain, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." (Gen 4:10). Abel's blood did not of course literally speak, but the understanding of the writer is that it was accusing Cain and crying out for vengeance.

In contrast, Jesus' blood which he bled on the cross cries out for forgiveness and mercy. These are two different kinds of justice – justice which punishes and justice which restores the breakdown of relationship. Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant between humanity

and God but also between humans. In this new covenant justice restores and makes whole. Justice rebuilds community.

With Abel's blood on his hands, Cain became a pariah. With Jesus' blood metaphorically sprinkled on us like the blood of an ancient sacrifice, we become a people of reconciliation.

Sometimes when we look at the divisions and the increasing tensions in society we think there is nothing we can do. But that is not true. There is much that we can do right here in San Luis Obispo. We can take the risk of reaching out across boundaries of habit, convention, ethnicity, gender and familiarity.

As a congregation we have several opportunities to do so. This Wednesday, we offer Laundry of Love – free laundry for our neighbors in need. This is a time not just to provide clean clothes and bedding but also to build friendships with people we don't normally meet. It takes a while to wash and dry clothes and that provides time to reach out and meet someone different with respect and love and caring. Next week we get to serve the Community Dinner. Again, this is a time when we can meet neighbors in a new way. Serving food is good. Sitting down and meeting people where they are, finding the Christ in them and loving them just as they are, is even better. We have a similar opportunity when we serve at People's Kitchen – a chance to reach across social boundaries to touch and be touched by the other.

And of course the Abundance Shop is our major ministry. This is not just about providing a resource for recycling and reusing, about providing low cost clothes and household items for those in need – it is much more than that. It is about making caring relationships with people throughout the community. some poor, some wealthy, some who speak English, some who struggle and some who have only a few words. All

the world comes through the shop and for many of them it is the only connection they have with the Jesus Movement – it is the only time they meet God with flesh on. If you have never worked at the Shop I encourage you to consider volunteering – we need sorters and at present we are short of several cashiers. This is a place where we live out the new covenant, seeing Christ in all beings. This is a place where we live our spirituality and instead of being self-absorbed we can become Christ-absorbed.

So I want to challenge you to take a step this week across a boundary of your own. This may be quite simple – you might speak to someone who you see regularly, like a neighbor, but have never stopped to have a conversation with. You might choose to help with Laundry Love to meet some new people. You might look for someone of another ethnic background and find a way to strike up a conversation. Or you might call that family member who has a different political stance to you, or even the one who is a fundamentalist Christian. You don't need to talk about what separates you but rather about what you have in common.

And let us also reach out in prayer. Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies. He knew we'd have people who oppose us or people whose values we abhor. Pick someone who you find difficult to like or to trust, and make a commitment to pray for them.

Because we are the ones who have been given the new vision, we are the ones who “have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering...” We are the ones who have been called to turn away from self-absorption and to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. We are the people of reconciliation.