

When we resent the intrusion by the federal government into our regional needs and wants, our territory takes on the even larger boundaries of "our state."

When threats of war or acts of terrorism crash onto our shores, we find ourselves yearning for ways to protect "our nation."

When our ozone layer starts to fizzle away from fluorocarbons, we suddenly feel the need to defend "our planet."

When we eventually draw our lines so broad and wide that they encompass the whole earth, we see that what was once a "line" has now become a circle - a circle of care and concern that puts every living creature on the "inside" of this boundary.

Jesus called attention to this kind of line in today's parable. The rich man, during his life on earth, drew his lines very tightly about himself and his possessions. Those lines kept Lazarus in poverty, misery, and hunger at the rich man's gate. Lazarus was of no concern to the rich man because Lazarus' agony lay on the other side of the rich man's line. The rich man's "territorial imperative" shut Lazarus out.

But in our parable, the rich man gets some new territory: he dies and goes to hell. The rich man suddenly finds himself now on the wrong side of the line he once drew. A "chasm" which no one may cross - a clear line of demarcation - separates those in heaven from those in hell. It is only when he is on the wrong side of the line that the rich man recognizes the truth about what was "his," about what truly lay within the boundaries of his concern when he was on earth. Only now does the rich man see Lazarus as a brother.

Why is the rich man in hell? The parable doesn't explicitly tell us. Jesus does not charge the rich man with any gross or notorious sin. Clearly, he was selfish, uncaring, and stunningly oblivious to the needs of his neighbors, and he did nothing to help Lazarus. But the story does not paint the rich man as an uncommonly cruel man or a heinous evildoer.

Notice, though, that when the rich man finds himself in hell, he does not ask for a review of his case or release on the grounds of pity or mercy. All pretense is stripped away. The rich man is under the full weight of his own guilt. He knows he deserves to be in hell. All he asks for is the smallest hint of

relief - some water to slake his thirst - but he won't get it. There is no hope for a moment's pause in the crushing, eternal torment of his own guilty conscience.

His only concern, then, is for his brothers. He knows they are exactly like him: respectable, complacent, comfortably wealthy pillars of society, doing whatever they want, going through the motions of enough religious activity to maintain an honorable reputation, but headed directly for hell. So, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers.

There are some assumptions to be drawn in the rich man's request. First, we can infer that the rich man was a religious man because he recognized Abraham and called him "father." He assumes that his Jewish heritage counts for something. As part of God's covenant people, the rich man is trading his descent from Abraham for the favor of warning his brothers. Second, the request suggests that his brothers would recognize Lazarus, the beggar who used to lie in misery at their brother's doorstep. They probably ignored Lazarus in life, just as their brother did, but a message from beyond the grave would certainly get their attention.

Finally, we may assume that the rich man's view of Lazarus is not so very changed. The rich man still considers Lazarus to be beneath him, a nobody he can give orders to and send on errands. The rich man is still drawing lines that separate him from Lazarus. His nature cannot be changed, even when confronted with his own guilt.

Abraham denies the rich man's request, reminding him that on earth he had every pleasure while Lazarus lived in agony. Now their fortunes are reversed, the tables are turned, and the rich man is in agony while Lazarus receives comfort. Abraham's response is firm: "[Your brothers] have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29). The Word of God in Scripture, says Abraham, is enough to teach what God requires.

The time for the rich man to hear God's instruction and to re-draw his territorial lines was while he lived on earth. For him, that opportunity is past. The rich man must now exist within the confines of the territory he sculpted out for himself while on earth. The rich man is in hell, not because he lacked information, but because he ignored the message he received through the Word of God. If the brothers will open their ears and eyes and hearts and minds and believe the Word of God, they may yet change their future.

This parable is a warning to each of us and to the Church. The Word of God tells us what the Lord requires of us: we are to “*do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God*” (Micah 6:8). The time to do that is now, with the people nearest to us, through the opportunities God presents to us. If we draw lines that shut people out, we may find ourselves shut out. If we limit our territory now, we may find ourselves in some hot terrain later. The chasm between heaven and hell, according to Abraham, is wide and the separation permanent.

In all his wisdom, however, Abraham did not strictly speak the truth to the rich man

when he declared that the chasm lying between them could not be crossed. Through the power of the cross, Jesus breached the boundary between heaven and hell. Jesus broke the power of death and crashed the gates of hell. Jesus did for us what Abraham could not do for the rich man: he bridged the gap so that we could get back to God. With his arms stretched wide on the cross, Jesus could encircle the whole world.

American Poet Edwin Markham (1852-1940) wrote a verse about drawing lines:

“He drew a circle that shut me out-  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle and took him in!”

God drew a circle that took us in because God’s territorial imperative is bigger than we can comprehend. Jesus draws endless circles around us: circles of love, circles of hope, circles of peace. The Holy Spirit compels us to climb over our self-made lines and step into the middle of God’s greater circle. God calls on us to draw circles that take in everyone willing to hear God’s Word and work for God’s Kingdom. For those who draw big circles in this life, for those who hear God’s Word and believe it and obey it, there is a hope-filled future. Let’s be people who draw circles, not lines.

*Prayer: Jesus, your teachings call me to a new way of seeing the familiar world around me. Please give me clarity and energy to see and serve those who suffer. God help us to change. To change ourselves and to change our world. To know the need for it. To deal with the pain of it. To feel the joy of it. To undertake the journey without understanding the destination. The art of gentle revolution. Amen.*

## Drawing Lines

Sunday, November 18, 2018

Luke 16:15

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Each of the various disciplines within the social sciences likes to believe that it has a finger on what makes human beings “tick.” For Freudian psychologists, sexuality is the driving force behind all we do. Disciples of Eugene Skinner believe that the simple desire to experience pleasure rather than pain is what shapes our behavior. Economists find fiscal reasons lying at the root of all human activities.

There is one branch of thought among behavioral psychologists that suggests all our actions and motivations grow out of one ancient drive: the need to establish and protect our own territory. This theory is known as the “territorial imperative.” Proponents consider this theory to be the reason birds sing, insects buzz and swarm, and dogs bark and bite. In human beings, the “territorial imperative” can explain everything from why we spend all our precious “free time” taking care of our yards, to the continued rise and fall of nation-states, to the ongoing nature of ethnic wars.

This “territorial imperative” requires us to draw lines around people, things, and property; and once we’ve drawn those lines we declare everything on our side of the line “ours.” What’s on the other side of the line is “yours.” Robert Frost’s poetic declaration that “Good fences make good neighbors” is penetrating proof of the “territorial imperative.” Whenever you see a “No Trespass” sign posted, you are facing a warning not to step over the line.

The lines we draw around what is “ours” varies from situation to situation. When people trespass against us by touching a “tender spot” where we are vulnerable to offense, we begin to defend “our space.”

When the neighbor’s dog leaves something inside our fence, we know exactly where the point of trespass lines: “our yard.”

When a wave of robberies begins to haunt our part of town, our territorial line suddenly expands to include “our neighborhood.”