

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
February 16, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:21-30

Sermon: Where do you draw the line?

“It is better for you to lose one of your limbs than for your whole body to go into hell.”
Yikes. *“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away..”* okay. *“If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement... and if you say “you fool” you will be liable to the hell of fire.”* Now I am really worried!

These are some of the most challenging verses in the Bible. They are a preacher’s nightmare. A Sunday school teacher’s worst fear. The imagery alone is terrifying: murders and hellfire, prisons and accusations; lust and self-imposed amputations – it would be so much easier to just ignore them!

BUT these passages do ask a very important question: Where do you draw the line? Where will you draw the line between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, appropriate and inappropriate, faith-full and not faithful for those who say they follow Jesus.

When I hear words about “drawing the line” as a minister, I find it very depressing. To me, drawing a line applied to the Christian faith community creates the image of a church which is a closed circle, like a walled fortress where only those found to be truly faithful have are inside. Or it is a line around an exclusive club for those who think they are somehow superior to those on the outside. But according to the gospel stories, that’s not who Jesus called us be.

It is also true, however, to notice that there were times where Jesus did seem to draw the line and to say NO. “No – that is not of God’s kingdom.” He drew the line not at people but at hatred and exploitation, at judgement and prejudice, at attacks on those who were more vulnerable, and at abuse.

Because sometimes drawing the line means standing up to name what is wrong or corrupt or unjust.

In the Hebrew scripture story from Exodus to Deuteronomy we find Moses and the people of Israel gathering on the threshold of the promised land. They have been through slavery in Egypt under terrible oppression. God sent them Moses as leader, to find their way to liberation. They wandered for forty years in the wilderness, learning how to trust God completely.

So, as they finally stood at the threshold of the return to their homeland, Moses drew the line for his people.

“You know your past,” he said to them. “And you believe in your future. But as you are assembled today, men, women, and children – Israelites and non-Israelites in our midst – today I am inviting you to join me on one side of the line. I am asking you to make a choice and to abide in that choice.”

It was there that Moses drew the line for his people. He knew that his people would enter the promised land (the land of milk and honey), and raise their herds and plant their crops and prosper their households. Once they were comfortable and happy, however, they might forget that it was God that liberated them, that it was God who fed them in the wilderness, that it was God who created the land and the crops and the families and the herds in the first place. It was God who had blessed it all and made it good.

The people might forget and start believing that they deserved this wealth and their comfort and eventually make that belief their power over others.

So Moses drew a line around the community. Moses drew that line not to corral them with rules and restrictions. Moses didn't draw the line to keep other people out, people with different languages or skin colours or cultures. Moses drew a line around the community to define them, and to give them shape, to give them coherence and a way of understanding each other.

The line around their community as God's people would be gratitude. Gratitude for a God who loved them, a God who wanted liberation and justice and dignity not just in the past but going forward too. Gratitude that could be spelled out in their own humble attitude. Gratitude demonstrated in a world view that admitted they did not “win” or “deserve” or “earn” the blessings of life. . A world view that is hinged on a loving, compassionate, forgiving God – and that called people to do the same.

“by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering.” Deut 30:16

Moses was drawing that line to give the people of God shape and meaning and something to pass on to their children. He was also giving them a choice. A choice that would go on to shape the community long into the future.

When Jesus drew another line for people who wanted to follow him to God, Jesus drew a line that was much bigger and that dove deeper than the standards of his day.

“Don't just bring an offering to worship and think you are absolved of all the gossip and abuse you indulged in- this week.” Jesus said: “God wants you to build relationships that are healthy and honest – you can disagree but still reconcile with one another.”

“Don’t think that just because you are not sleeping around that you are being a good husband or wife. You should be most passionate about your life partner – not ogling that man or woman down the street.”

“You have to draw the line somewhere,” Said Jesus: “Listen to your heart and let love control your wandering eye and your straying hands. God dwells in your heart of hearts. God draws a connecting line between you and peace, a connecting line between you and love, a connecting line between you and grace. Let that be your guideline instead of any line that divides or excludes.”

I would like to re-frame my old image of what it means to draw the line. Instead of a line that divides or excludes, let’s imagine in its place: what it means to draw a line... as an artist? To me, drawing a line on a clean sheet of paper – that is not limiting. It’s full of possibility and creativity.

Perhaps that first line on the page will turn out to be the tree tops or the coast line of your favourite landscape. Or perhaps the line might become the opening words of a poem or a love letter or the great Canadian novel? Or maybe the line will evolve into a column of numbers that actually make sense, or maybe provide the social statistics that finally bring balance and perspective to the world?

Theologically speaking, we should be opposed to drawing any line that excludes. But a line can also give shape to the world around us, it allows us to express who we really are.

Lately we have been seeing a lot of lines drawn: Lines that keep people from governing their own land, that keep work crews from working, that keep teachers from teaching and trains from running. Nobody is happy when everything grinds to a halt.

When we draw a line that says someone else’s view is not important or that consultation is finished or that you are on the wrong side of my line, compassion and goodness and generosity and humility have no opportunity to influence the outcome.

We need to draw a new line, I think, one inspired that is by Moses and Jesus before us. A line whose definition includes instead of excluding. A line that creates justice in a place of injustice. A permeable line where conversation and truth-telling can happen. Where people can name what really matters and be believed and instead of belittled.

Moses and Jesus drew the line in a way that connected people to God, to each other, to their own imaginations. They imagined the ordinary world amalgamated with the Kindom of God. They imagined a place where worth was not calculated by the bottom line. They imagined a place where the children of God were free and yet knew their limitations. They imagined a place where (ultimately) drawing the line meant creativity and security and respect for each other.

May we take the direction of that holy creativity and shape our world with lines that God has blessed. Amen