

March 3, 2024
1 Corinthians 13:4-13
Exodus 20:1-17

The Promise of Love is Boundaries

During the season of Lent, from now until March 31 which is Easter, we are meditating on love. We are contemplating what love is and what it isn't. And how we love God with our heart and mind and strength. And how we might better love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus commanded us to love one another as he loved us. Love is something we should be good at. At least we should be trying to be.

In the Bible, in the beginning, God created the world and loved it.

Everything was innocence and hope in the Garden of Eden. Then humans started being human. And there was deceit and disappointment and lies and hurt. Innocence was lost. Things went downhill from there.

In a flood of anger God attempted to clean things up and reset things with Noah and an ark of animals. But after seeing the devastation God promised God would never do that again. Because love isn't based on fear or threats. Love promises that we are safe. So our love must promise that to others too. Last week, we read about God's promise to Abraham and Sarah to give them a home and a family. With them, we learned that

the promise of love is personal. For particular people in a particular time and space. Or our love must be for the specific people in our lives.

And today, the Ten Commandments teach us that love promises to set boundaries. Love gives us rules and sets limits. Love insists on respect for other people and for ourselves. And for the God above us who made us all.

Boundaries and limits don't seem like they have much to do with love. Love is gracious and abundant. But boundaries are restrictive. They put controls on our behavior. Putting up stop signs and do not enter signs, telling us what we can and cannot do. But love needs stop signs. It needs limits because that's how we respect each other. That's how we love one another and live as a community. We agree that together that we shouldn't steal our neighbor's lawn furniture. Or drive 100 mph on Midway Rd. Or set the school on fire. Or sell bad drugs to people. Or kill someone. Or tell lies about people. Or eat all the Oreos and say it wasn't us. We have rules for the sake of love.

That's why we have the Ten Commandments. With these rules, God creates a community out of the people God has rescued from slavery in

Egypt. God has sent Moses down from Mt Sinai with an armload of stone tablets to a covenant with them that will be set in stone. God will be their God and they will be God's people. But first, there need to be ground rules. They need to be clear about the expectations. And what God wants from them as a community built on God's justice and mercy. The Ten Commandments create boundaries. They spell out what is acceptable and what is unacceptable behavior for the people of God. Everything that wants to function and have life needs boundaries. Just like the cells of our bodies. Our cells need walls around them. They need a strong membrane that keeps out what needs to stay out and keeps in what needs to stay in. If a cell wall is damaged or broken, the cell dies. It can't function anymore. We need personal barriers just like our cells. We need boundaries to survive.

That's our first lesson for today. All of us need boundaries. And all of us deserve them. Some of us are good at setting them. Some of us are good at saying no and expecting people to respect that. But some of us aren't. We need encouragement. We need help remembering that our boundaries matter. I have a list posted in my office called A Personal Bill

of Rights. It says: I have the right to ask for what I want. I have the right to not have to read people's minds. I have the right to expect others to be honest. I have the right to make mistakes. I have the right to face my own consequences. I have the right to feel my own feelings. I have the right to my own personal space and time. I have the right to be treated with dignity and to be treated with respected. You have those rights too. And so does the person next to you. Maybe all of us could use a list like this posted somewhere so we can remember that.

You have a right to yourself and to your boundaries. And it's not OK for someone to act as if you don't. It's not OK for others to take what is yours. It's not OK for others to bully their way past your barriers and force you to comply. It's not OK for others to pull down the boundaries between you and make you responsible for their emotions or their behavior. It's not ok when others refuse your limits. Or when they use shame or guilt to make you comply. It's not ok when they take the words of the apostle Paul and twist them and tell you that you should give more, that; "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things

endures all things.” No, you don’t have to endure what really belongs to someone else.

Love respects other people. It honors their right to exist as full human beings. It does not kill or lie or steal from others. It does not ignore others or erase others or devalue others. Love treats others with the same respect as we want. That’s what the Ten Commandments are. They are rules for how to have life together as a community. They are based on respecting the limits we have. The limits of God. The limits of love.

All of us deserve boundaries. That’s the first lesson. And the second lesson is that those boundaries between us need to be clear. Brene Brown, a professor at University of Houston and author of many books on relationships, says that clear is kind, unclear is unkind. Love means communicating. It means telling people what we expect and what the ground rules are. Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind. God is being clear with the Ten Commandments. God is being kind. God is saying, look, here is what I need. If I’m going to be your God and you are going to be my people, first of all, I need you to respect me. That’s what the first three of the Ten Commandments are about. God is being clear: Don’t

worship other gods. Don't make a joke of my name. Don't make an idol and pretend it can save you like I can.

Then God is clear about how the people should treat each other. These are the rules for their community to be a good community. They must be honest and fair and kind. Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't kill. Don't want what isn't yours. Don't work so hard you forget to have fun. Don't ignore your elders. Respect each other. Deal? Or no deal?

God makes it clear in the Ten Commandments. Everyone in the community deserves justice and dignity and mercy. Because it wasn't like that under Pharaoh. Back in Egypt Pharaoh made the rules. And Pharaoh had no respect for them. He could kill their children. And steal their labor. And lie about their value and the purpose of life. Even now there are Pharaohs among us who lie and cheat and steal people's labor and oppress them. Who don't care and don't want to love others. But God has delivered us from that. God has rescued us from Pharaoh just like the people of Israel and we aren't going back to his system that disrespects life and crushes it. God has made some new ground rules. No one is going to be oppressed or exploited in God's community.

God's commandments are clear. And clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.

That's how we love one another. What talk about our needs. We set our limits and respect the limits of others. We remember that boundaries embody justice and mercy. And they are necessary for life.

And the third lesson is that we will have to set those boundaries again and again. We will have to go back and remember them. We will have to reestablish them. We will even have to protect them and defend them.

Because people won't respect them. The kingdoms of this world have a way of running over them. Remember Pharaoh. Remember, he has an empire to run. And he always wants more and more and more. He doesn't want community. He wants slaves he can use. He doesn't care about dignity or respect. There are still Pharaohs everywhere. But God wants us to be free of Pharaoh. God has new rules for us to live by.

Rules that set boundaries and teach us to remember what matters and what life is about.

Our family is a football family. Like any sport, it means lots of practice and time away from home. And when the season was over, people asked us if the boys would play another sport. Would they do another team?

Would they travel? How about lacrosse? How about basketball? You need to keep them busy. They seemed surprised when we said no. We set our limits. We believe in Sabbath. We believe in boundaries. We believe other things matter more: family time. Church time. Service to our community time. Because that's what life is about. It's not just about us. It's about all of us. And God has told us what matters. God has said that we have limits. God has made it clear there is only one God we can worship and serve.

At times, we will have to defend our boundaries. To stand up for our limits. To say no. We might need to change them sometimes. Or rework them in whatever place we are in life. We might need to reestablish them with family or friends. But that's ok. We have the space and grace to do that. From God and from each other. The promise of love is the promise of secure boundaries for each of us, for all of us. For the sake of life. For the sake of our community together. For you and for me. For the sake of our true Lord and Master who meets us at this table. Who commands us to love one another as he has loved us. Let our love give us boundaries and respect and abundant life together.