

Boundary and Hospitality

BY CAROLINE A. WESTERHOFF

In our increasingly pluralistic society, our words and practices of inclusion often reflect sentimental, sloppy thinking. To say everyone is included in our family of faith is to confuse INCLUSION with WELCOME. To welcome is to receive with pleasure, to delight in another's being among us for a time, to be hospitable.

I began my summer's sabbatical leave with a three-day silent retreat at the Cistercian Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Monastery about thirty-five miles from my home. I longed for this solitary venture of extended silence with God before I embarked on three months of thinking and writing. Still, the prospect of sitting with God for three days, and especially for three nights, loomed a daunting one. Suppose God were to say things I did not want to hear? Or worse, suppose God said nothing at all? Suppose the silence went both ways?

Upon arrival and checking in, I easily found my sparsely furnished, pleasant room. A single sheet of information on the small desk told me where I could go and provided the schedule for meals and times of prayer. A graciously worded paragraph reminded me that while I was welcome to attend daily community masses, as a non-Roman Catholic, I could not receive communion; prayer for the unity of the Church would be appropriate. I spent the rest of the time before vespers at 5:30 p.m. exploring my surroundings, soon discovering that signs on doors and fences gave me all the directions I needed: "Women's Toilet," "Women's Shower Room," "To the Church," "Silent Area," "Please Do Not Enter – Cloistered Area." I began to feel more at ease: paradoxically welcomed, greeted hospitably, as I became aware of the boundaries.

The monastery day begins with vigils in the church at 4:00 a.m., and on my first morning, I presented myself at a door connecting the retreat house

with the church. After thoroughly dousing myself with holy water from the baptismal font at the entrance, I slipped into the dark space and made my way to the pews assigned to visitors and those on retreat. One by one, the monks, attired in their black and white Trappist habits, began to emerge from the shadows and take their places in the stalls. Little lights blinked on as they opened books and arranged music.

The five prayer services of the daily office and the community mass ordered my days and nights. Between them, I sat in the church and prayed or walked the peaceful grounds, and in the end, only one of us was silent. In the chanting of the monks, the reading of the Word, and the silence of the garden and the peaceful lakeside, God spoke clearly. Or perhaps I should say that in *my* silence, I could hear what I suspect God says to me all along.

One of the things my visit to the monastery stirred up in me was my long fascination with boundaries, grounded in years of work with church systems and my early training as a biologist. The notion of boundary is complex and one that we ignore to the peril of our valued relationships. I further believe that the concept of boundary, put in a theological framework, can give us guideposts for faithful participation in God's reign.

A boundary is a line drawn that defines and establishes identity. All within the circumscription of that line makes up a whole, an entity. Neither good nor bad in its own right, a boundary determines something that can be pointed to and named: a person, a family, a geographical region, a city, a town, a nation, a parish church, a denomination, a faith. A boundary provides essential limits, for what is not limited, bounded, merges with its context and ceases to exist in its own particular way.

Some boundaries can be seen or touched; others cannot. Among the former are the lines determined and set down by surveyors or the paved streets encircling plots of city land or the dusty roads outlining field and pasture. The border is the line between country and country, and we call ourselves citizens of either

one side or the other. The doors and fences marking the monastery's cloister were lines I could reach out and feel, even though I was not to pass through them. The four surrounding walls defined my room there.

The horizon is the ultimate line that we can see though never touch. For me, the horizon is God's line, a divine border, if you will, drawn to distinguish between sea and sky, earth and heaven, for me a symbol of future

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hope and expectation. I stare at it for hours when I am at the seaside, trying to sort things out and regain perspective, to take back into myself some sense of God's order, God's limits.

There are other lines, a second category of boundaries, that are invisible but can be named or put into words. Time provides a good example. While we can measure time with watch, clock, or calendar, we cannot see or touch it. Nevertheless, the boundary of time is real and potent. Our acknowledgment and thoughtful management of it enhances our credibility; our cavalier disregard of time causes us to lose the trust and confidence of others.

These invisible lines are the cords encircling those who share certain beliefs, understandings, and values or who have agreed to abide by the same rules, regulations, and guidelines. Such a boundary is the Benedictine Rule of community prayer, engagement with the Word, and manual labor, all apart from the world, by which the Trappist monks order their lives. These lines are the bands encircling family and church; wrapped around team, political party, military unit; around gang or cult. *This is who we are; this is what we do and don't do.* And while we cannot literally see the cord around all who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is implicit in Paul's assertion of one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

These spoken and written lines take on shape and power often through stories. I posit that an ultimate definition of humankind lies in our ability and longing to tell and listen to stories. We pass on stories from generation to generation to shape and form character, to pass on the godly and moral code. When children ask again and again to hear a story, they are really asking us to tell them who they are, to remind them of the fundamental definitions giving meaning and shape to their lives. But even if the story itself is slight, lacking in substance, the act of storytelling itself sets boundaries that speak volumes about safety and consistency. Any parent trying to cut short the bedtime ritual and stopped cold in the process can attest to this.

A shared common story is necessary for a community of faith. At the family observance of the Jewish Passover, the *Seder*, the foundational narrative of the Jewish people is told once again by the head of the household: the great story of the Exodus. For us in the Christian family, every time we gather for worship we are remembering the foundational story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and making it ours anew.

I enter a community whose boundary is difficult to put into words when I take my two-mile walk, a morning ritual that sparks energy for the day. The route includes a trail around a large office park. Nearby is an apartment building providing subsidized housing to older women and men, many of whom have emigrated from Eastern Europe. They regularly stroll the path, stopping to sit on benches scattered along the way and chat together.

I have come to recognize faces, and they recognize me as well. We nod and wave. They may attempt to say hello in English, while I motion with my arms and hands. I take notice when I have missed seeing someone for a

time, and they seem to notice when I have been absent. A mutual spirit of hospitality binds me to these people, a daily confirmation that we are alive together at this time, in this place, and glad to be so. I consider them my neighbors and friends, and I am grateful for our relationship.

If you ask me to describe the essence of this community, I would say that it is marked by greetings repeatedly received and given. I do not know the names of my fellow members or much about them, other than what I manage to piece together and imagine. Since we do not share a common language, extended conversation is impossible. Still, I have come to understand that the connection I have with them is an integral part of my daily rule for mental, physical, and spiritual health. A boundary of spirit ties us together.

Some boundaries are visible and tangible, some can be portrayed in word and story, and some are lines of spirit, often revealed in ways transcending ordinary means of expression. Such are the cords of passion binding lover to beloved. Such is the ring God wraps around the whole created order, the band best realized through sign and symbol: rainbow and dove, cloud and fire, water and wind, bread and wine. This ultimate boundary, approached through the deep and wondering eyes of imagination, dream, and prayer, bursts forth in poem and symphony, on the painter's canvas, and in the visions of the mystics. It shines through the jeweled colors of stained glass windows and grazes the heights of cathedral vaults in musical tones so achingly clear we almost cannot bear to hear them.

These categories of boundaries can be likened to our skin. They separate and differentiate what is

inside from what is out. They highlight the differences among us: those of size and skin tone, gender and sexual orientation, age and intellect, language and culture, interest and personality, differences that are plainly visible, as well as those that only become apparent when we brave engaging each other deeply and over time. I think God delights in our differences

and the rich creation they provide. How bleak our existence would be if we were to look around and see only duplicates of ourselves.

Paul's words to the Galatians might seem to contradict this. He writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). But we would be wrong to think Paul is ignoring the truth and beauty of our

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peculiarities with these words. His key phrase is “in Christ Jesus.” Paul is talking about baptism.

He is saying that among us, the baptized, the neat compartments do not hold, the old hierarchies should not count. No one of us is better in the eyes of God. Each human being, says Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth, is precious beyond measure: “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many” (12:14). Still, we must ask who we are who gather around the table of the Lord’s Supper, the meal of the baptized. What does it mean to be there? What makes us different, not better, but different? The answer is that we preach Christ Jesus and try to model our lives after his.

But while we attempt to stand strong in our identity, our understandings of who we are and for what we stand do mature and change with the passing of time. We can be dead wrong: past positions on racial segregation and the place of women are cases in point. We currently struggle with issues of sexual orientation, and outcomes are yet to be seen. God continues to offer us new and surprising opportunities to amend our ways, modify our boundaries, and practice hospitality, and we must pray for a continuing willingness to make our confessions of sin and grow to maturity in Christ.

But even with this warning against prideful inflexibility in our stands, we must have a rock-solid foundation if we are to be and act with vitality and meaning. We must have something to which we will give our lives if the Church is to endure with integrity and perform with courage, if the Church is to be at all different from the culture in which it finds itself. We preach that Jesus is Lord of the Church, his Body.

Many talk a great deal about inclusion in our increasingly pluralistic society. But although well intended, our words and practices of inclusion too often reflect sentimental, sloppy thinking. When we say that everyone is included in our family of faith or at the table, I think we are confusing *inclusion* with *welcome*. True, if we are to be the ones whose particular work is the restoration of all people to unity with God, each other, and the creation in Christ, then we must welcome all into our company. To welcome is to receive with pleasure, to delight in another’s being among us for a time, to be hospitable.

But an inside requires an outside. We must have something into which we can extend authentic invitations. In this light, inclusion and exclusion paradoxically become opposite sides of the same coin. Neither makes sense without the other. The word “inclusion” comes from the Latin *inclusio*: to shut in, to confine, to commit. To include goes beyond a willingness to welcome, to receive. Rather, it means to take in as a member. If anyone and everyone are too easily included, we are saying in effect that anything goes. We are disclaiming our boundaries, and without bounds, we do not exist. The cost is that of identity.

Granted, commitment, like conversion, is not a singular happening. Our commitment to a community or a family grows (or diminishes) over time.

We are included or include at deeper and deeper levels as we live in that community and come to understand what belonging means. But if initial membership is without qualification, then we stand for little other than being nonsensically “inclusive.” This is why the Church’s requirements and preparation for baptism are so important; why obligations of financial stewardship and participation in worship go far deeper than merely being means to pay bills and fill pews; why I believe the Lord’s Supper is the meal of the baptized, not a social occasion of hospitality. This meal re-members us into the Body of Christ.

Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They give him a number of interesting answers. Jesus presses on with the ultimate boundary question each and every one of us will have to answer for ourselves, “But who do *you* say that I am?” Peter answers, “The Messiah of God.” This is the ground on which we are to stand: Jesus is the One. In Jesus, God came among us to show us what matters most. In Jesus, God came among us to reveal the shocking power of love. If we are to come anywhere close to being who we say we are, we must not lose grasp of this central assertion: Jesus is our way and our truth and our life.

But to profess that Jesus is the Christ finally is not a matter of doctrine and belief, not a matter of verbal assent. We are to reveal the shocking power of love. We are to challenge the principalities and powers, particularly when we are the principalities and powers. We are to be willing to suffer with and for the other, to give away when we think we can give no more. Like Jesus, we are to welcome strangers and sinners into our midst, just as we ourselves have been welcomed into God’s hospitable company. But we first must have the baptismal identity and its boundaries intact before we can genuinely welcome all those who choose to come.†

NOTE

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CAROLINE A. WESTERHOFF

is the retired Canon for Ministry in the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta, Georgia.