

This Is Us: 2. Boundaries
Galatians 5:1, 13-15, 22-23
September 16, 2018
Pastor Steve Richards

Nothing brings us greater joy than relationships when they are working right, and nothing brings us greater pain when they are not. This is us.

Often, we find ourselves in a relationship that isn't working. Something is not right – and not because we haven't tried. We've tried. But trying harder isn't working. Being nice isn't working. Taking responsibility for others (taking care of others) isn't working. In the first chapter of Genesis – that poetic story of creation, after God made the humans, God said, here are your marching orders: **Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.** We were made in the image of God, created to take responsibility for certain tasks – but we weren't told to do everything. It takes wisdom to know what we should be doing and what we should not be doing. And much of the time, that's the problem. Boundaries.

A boundary is a property line. If you have a house or even if you live in an apartment, there is a property line. It is the boundary that separates what you own, what you control, and what you are responsible for. Relationships also have boundaries. They are easier to see in the physical world. A few years ago, Amanda and I decided to plant a number of trees along one side of our property. In the years leading up to that decision, it wasn't clear where the property line was. Five different families have lived in the house next to ours and with each family the line has varied when it came to mowing our yards, but if we were planting trees, not only did we want to be sure the trees were planted on our property but because the trees would grow much larger we wanted and our neighbors wanted the future growth to also be on our property. So, we paid for a survey company to come out and mark the property line – turns out it wasn't where we thought it was. The boundary makes a difference. That's also true in a relationship. There is me and there is the other person. We are separate. I am my own person and the other is his or her own person and we must respect the boundaries. I can control what's on my property, but I can't reach over to take control of your property. We often do: "I think you should dye your hair or lose weight or think differently about that – more like I do. In fact, if you could just be more like me."

And you get into trouble, because you've just crossed the line – and Jesus called that trespassing. Remember the prayer that Jesus taught? "Forgive us our trespasses." There is a line, a boundary – and everyone of us struggles with this – stepping over the line attempting to control what is not mine to control and we hurt each other.

In this morning's scripture, we heard the words of the apostle Paul: **Christ has set us free for freedom.** Paul was writing to churches that he started in the region of Galatia. He traveled through the region, telling people about the resurrection of Jesus and they believed. They became part of the movement. And Paul told them God had set them free from rules and practices that they had been taught were necessary to be acceptable to God. The God who raised Jesus has set you free. But when Paul left the region, other teachers arrived who taught that Paul was wrong. They said, you must follow certain practices, namely circumcision to be able to come close to God. Hearing what has happened, Paul sent this letter – reinforcing his original message: Christ has set you free. That's why Christ died. That's why God raised Jesus to life. You are free. **...only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love.** God sets us free from so that we are free for. My freedom comes with responsibility. I am responsible for my feelings, my emotions, my

behaviors. There's trouble when I want to control you or blame you for my behaviors: "You make me so mad." No you don't. I choose. I am responsible for my actions.

If I ruled the world, there are certain words that I would ban from the English language. **You need to...** and **You should...** Those words get us into all kinds of relationship trouble. Let's say Mom or Dad walks in the house and Johnny is on the couch playing video games and Mom says, "You need to get up and go to your room and do your homework. You need to..." But Johnny is feeling absolutely no need to do those things. That's why he's on the couch playing video games. His only need is to get this woman to stop nagging him. She is trying to control and that's nagging. But there are things she can control. She could say, "So Johnny, here's the deal. Tomorrow we are going to the Vikings game and we will have a great time and we want you to go, but here's how it works. Everybody who gets to go will have their chores done by 6:00 today and if your homework and chores are done you get to go. You can choose not to do those things. We want you to go to the game with us, but if not – remember Mabel, the babysitter from hell. It turns out she is available tomorrow, and she will be glad to come over, so if you choose the video games and not the homework and chores, you can spend the day with Mabel while we go to the game." And then Mom leaves the room. All of a sudden, Johnny has a thought he has never had: I need to do my homework. Now Johnny has a need! It was the boundary and freedom that caused him to take ownership of his life. And for this to work, Mom also has to take control of her life.

Many years ago, a couple came to me for help and he said, "She's so angry all the time and so controlling." And I asked her, "Why are you so angry and controlling?" And she said, "Because he's so irresponsible." "And why are you so irresponsible?" "I wouldn't be if she wouldn't get in my space all the time." It was like a tennis match – back and forth. Each one not taking control of their own side of the equation and instead, trying to control the other. That never works. It's never healthy. All humans are created in the image of God. We have been created with qualities that we see in God. God is omniscient and omnipresent and omnipotent. We have those qualities, just without the "omnis". God can control everything, and we are to have control of one – and that's self.

But what about when we are in a relationship with someone who is not taking responsibility for their own life? Let's say your neighbor has an apple tree and their tree is filling your yard with apples or they are not attending to their yard and all those dandelions that look pretty when they are yellow turn to seed and blow into your yard. Or your child is 43 and still sitting on the couch playing video games. Or the child grows up and is launched and it's their life but they aren't going anywhere. Whose life is it?

Henry Cloud describes a time when he was in college. He grew up in Mississippi and went to college in Dallas and he started dating a young woman who turned out to be the daughter of the governor of Texas. At first, he didn't know that, but then one day she invited him to meet her parents. The plan was to spend a week during the summer at their ranch outside Austin. He came to Dallas to pick her up at the Governor's Mansion and when he got there she wanted him to drive her car. He pulled out of the driveway but realized he was going the wrong way so he quickly made a U-turn and slammed head-on into a truck. The car was totaled and he didn't know what to do so he called his Dad and said, "Dad, what do I do?" And his dad said, "Son, let me get this straight. You just totaled your girlfriend's car which belongs to her father. He's the governor of Texas and you've never met him, and you are going to spend the next week with him. So what do you do? Son, if you are old enough to get yourself into this mess, you are old enough to get yourself out of it. But call me and tell me how you do it." And he hung up the phone.

That's a long way from being a helicopter parent. Boundaries: knowing what you own and what you can and cannot control. It's not just parenting, but employees and extended family and spouses who get angry – it's who owns what in a conflict. And it is not easy especially when there are emotions involved. And you may need a counselor to help sort this out.

One day Jesus told the story of a Good Samaritan. Even those who have never read the Bible, know about the Good Samaritan. Jesus told the story of a Jew walked from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked, beaten, robbed, and left for dead. It was the third person, the Samaritan, who stopped to help, picked him up, and brought to an inn. He paid for the man to stay there and then left, promising to return. But what if the injured man had said, "You can't leave now. Who will take care of me?" And the Samaritan said, "But I have business in Jericho." "Don't you think you are being selfish? I'm in pretty bad shape. To leave me now – you're not even acting like a Christian – Jesus won't be able to use you in a story." And so the Samaritan postpones his journey for a few days, stays with the injured man and when he finally gets to Jericho his business contacts say, "We waited as long as we could and then we did business with someone else." And now the Samaritan says to the Jew, "How could you do this to me? You just put me out of business." That's not the story Jesus told, but we know that story – moved by compassion to help someone but then manipulated into giving more than we want or are able to give. We need to know our boundaries. We will face hard situations, but they don't have power over us unless we allow that. Once we are clear about our boundaries, we can face someone whose life may be out of control. We can love them and support them without drowning in their dysfunction. Paul tells us: "Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

If you are growing spiritually you can be strong enough to care for yourself and be able to respond to another in a redemptive way – not with anger, not reacting, not controlling. "I want to help you, but I can't do all of that for you. And if that's not enough, I'm sorry but all I can control is me." The verse from Proverbs reminds us: **A person without self-control is like a breached city, one with no walls.** Without good boundaries, we are easily overwhelmed.

There was a time when I knew nothing about boundaries – But I learned. I didn't just go to a therapist, I married one! As a result, I don't think I've ever won an argument, because almost always the heart of the argument is trying to control what is not mine to control.

We all struggle. We all are a work in progress. We are all broken in some way. That's our human condition. We've all spent time on someone else's property, trying to control what is not ours to control. The Genesis creation story describes how God offered a garden paradise but we go our own way. God is up here and we are down here. Other religions teach that if you are good enough you can reach God, but if you mess up too much you won't make it. But God said, I will come down to where you are and help lift you up, help you be a person with boundaries so that you can experience the fruit of the spirit. No matter what you've done, there is nothing that you can do that will cause you to be outside of God's grace. When you are connected with God, you are empowered to do what you need to do to have a healthy relationship.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of September 16, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Lord, you've called us to love one another. We hear this truth and want to obey, but we confess that it is easier to look at what we think others need than to let you shape us into the people you want us to be. And so we pray to be people of love, to listen to others and to bear the burdens of those near us. We pray to be a people of love. Amen.

Monday, September 17

Scripture: Matthew 6:9-13

Pray like this: Our Father who is in heaven, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it's done in heaven. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us. And don't lead us into temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.

Observation: What the Lord's Prayer provides is a framework for prayer. After honoring God and the sovereignty of God (i.e. God is in control), Jesus' prayer turns to practical needs: the bread we need, forgiveness and protection from temptation. In verse 14, some translations use the word "trespasses" (Forgive us our trespasses). From what we learned on Sunday, a trespass means crossing a boundary in our attempt to control or take possession of what does not belong to us.

Application: What does it look like to trespass upon another person? In a relationship, when have you attempted to control or take possession of what did not belong to you? Why would you need forgiveness for this? Jesus linked forgiveness of your trespasses with how you forgive others who do the same to you. In other words, it begins with you.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, how often I am seeking what I want and what I think others should want. Help me to stay focused on what you want and how I can align my ways with yours. Amen.

Tuesday, September 18

Scripture: Joshua 24:14-15

"So now, revere the LORD. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the LORD. But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the LORD."

Observation: Throughout scripture, people are reminded of their choices and asked to take responsibility for them. In response to the Lord's graciousness, Joshua calls Israel to a decision. Which will you choose? We are in control of our choices no matter how we feel. Making decisions based on others' approval or on guilt breeds resentment, a product of our sinful nature. Setting boundaries inevitably involves taking responsibility for your choices.

Application: What is the choice that Joshua and his family are making? How does the way that Joshua communicates his choice to the Israelites show us an example of drawing a healthy boundary for ourselves and others? You are the one who makes the choice. You are the one who must live with the consequences.

Prayer: Loving God, you have made me with the ability and the freedom to choose. Help me to choose you, to follow you, to live toward your purpose for my life. Even when I do not choose wisely, may I see your grace waiting to offer me another chance. Amen.

Wednesday, September 19

Scripture: Galatians 6:7-8

Make no mistake, God is not mocked. A person will harvest what they plant. Those who plant only for their own benefit will harvest devastation from their selfishness, but those who plant for the benefit of the Spirit will harvest eternal life from the Spirit.

Observation: In these verses, Paul is talking about behavior. Behavior has consequences. If we study, we will reap good grades. If we go to work, we will get a paycheck. If we exercise, we will be in better health. If we act lovingly toward others, we will have closer relationships. On the negative side, if we sow idleness, irresponsibility, or out-of-control behavior, we can expect to reap the effects of living that way.

Application: How does what Paul says regarding sowing and reaping relate to setting boundaries? Can you recall a consequence resulting from not setting a boundary? When have you interrupted the law of sowing and reaping in someone's life and protected that person from the consequences that could have been good teachers?

Prayer: Lord, grant me the wisdom that I need in my relationships so that I can own what is truly mine. Grant me the courage to set boundaries and allow the natural consequences that you have designed. Amen.

Thursday, September 20

Scripture: Galatians 5:1, 13-15

Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again.

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other!

Observation: Paul announced to the Galatians that God had set them/us free from the religious laws which demanded certain practices in order to be deemed acceptable to God. You were set free from that, but with freedom comes responsibility. Not a responsibility to control others or place expectations on their lives, but to "serve each other through love."

Application: The commandment to love is the entire law for Christians. Any time you are not loving others, you are not taking full responsibility for yourself. You have disowned your heart. What is the relationship between freedom, self-control and having healthy boundaries?

Prayer: Merciful God, open my heart that I might learn your ways, practice them, internalize them and find freedom in your way of love. Amen.

Friday, September 21

Scripture: James 1:19-20; Proverbs 25:28

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness.

A person without self-control is like a breached city, one with no walls.

Observation: God has given us freedom. With freedom comes responsibility. Often we are attempting to control others when God has given us the responsibility to control just one – Self. It is called self-control. The Bible and psychological research affirm an important reality about healthy, fulfilled, happy people: they have self-control.

Application: What is the result of anger when it is an expression of a lack of self-control? How are anger and boundaries related?

Prayer: Open my eyes, Jesus, when I am out-of-control. Show me better ways to respond to what I see. Give me the ability to learn and the ability to receive love from others. Amen.

Saturday, September 22

Scripture: Romans 8:38-39

I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Observation: Relationships are a source of joy and a source of pain. There will be times when your best efforts fail and you will be out-of-control, straying beyond your boundaries and into someone else's "property." It is important to remember what Paul is saying to the Roman Christians, because relationships are not easy. It is impossible to get beyond God's loving reach! God's love is unconditional.

Application: Remember the good news – that no matter how severely you have trespassed upon another, nothing can separate you from God's love. How can you first receive and then share that healing love with those whom you have hurt?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your love never fails. Even when I have made a mess of things, your love never fails. Help me to be empowered by you to let your love flow through me with words and acts of love and forgiveness. Amen.