

“Boundaries”
Job 38:1-13; Acts 17:24-28;
Matthew 4:8-11; Mark 12:14-17

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If you were here last week, you might think that I think everything is uncertain because we talked about uncertainty and how it's tough to live into the future, not knowing exactly what's coming. In the midst of all of that, we recognized how much we need Jesus walking through the raging winds of chaos for us as he walked through the wind and the water to the disciples.

I do think we live with a lot of chaos and certain times in our lives feel more chaotic than others. Sometimes it feels that we're not sure where we're going or what's happening, but in the midst of all that, I'm going to argue that it's also bounded. As much as things may feel up-in-the-air, our lives really have a lot of boundaries to them. My go-to boundary is always gravity because it is so straightforward. I can't flap my arms and fly across the room. I can't jump up and stay up. We know what gravity does.

We know there are all kinds of boundaries in our lives. In some ways, time is a boundary. I can only go one direction in it. Sometimes I wish I could stop it for a while, even go backwards a little bit, but I can't do it. I'm bounded by the direction of time, and that's all I've got.

Space, place is also a boundary. I sometimes wish it weren't. I wish I could be two places at the same time, but I can't. I can only be in one place. We live with those boundaries all the time. We could go on; there are other kinds of boundaries like that.

Some of the reading I've been doing is about something called chaos theory, and it's about bounded systems as well. For example, even something like weather, which is pretty chaotic, is pretty bounded. I don't know what's going to happen in two weeks from now, but I can tell you it's going to be between 100 and 0 degrees. I can be pretty sure of that much. I can predict, within those boundaries, what the weather is going to be. But more than about a week away, to actually give you a better guess of what the temperature is going to be is pretty hard because weather is one of those chaotic systems, sensitive to the inputs. It doesn't always do the same thing.

Life feels a little bit like that to me sometimes. We live in this chaotic bounded system. If nothing else, we are bounded by birth and death. But there are all kinds of boundaries in life, aren't there? If we think about it, there are the physical boundaries we deal with. That's what Job was reminded of by God. "Were you there at creation when I set the boundaries of where the water and the land would be, when I created the heavens and the earth? Were you there when I did all that?" No. But we can notice that we live within that sort of bounded system.

There is also another kind of bounding that goes on and some of these boundaries aren't as visible. We might think of social boundaries, cultural boundaries we create,

ways of thinking. The way I grew up influences the way I see the world. I have said this before: I often say things “aren’t bad” when they are really “good” because I am from the Midwest. The way we situate ourselves in life is partly because of where we come from. So we have those kinds of boundaries that are invisible that we bounce up against, but we don’t really see. They are the kinds of things in our lives that do shove us around, even though we don’t really see them.

When we did the study last fall, we talked about different language registries. We might grow up in a place where we have a very informal language registry so we know how to talk to our friends. But when you get further in, you come up against this thing called formal registry and you have to figure out what it’s all about. Sometimes when I start trying to write, I realize that I have a pretty informal registry and I’m supposed to be writing as an academician. I’m supposed to have a different kind of registry. It’s interesting to see I’m up against a boundary.

As we think about that, there are all kinds of boundaries in our lives and some of them we don’t really see. The interesting thing about boundaries is that if you look up images of boundaries online, what you find are all these images of things that say “no boundaries” trying to show that we should set no limits, that you should be able to do anything. Then you have these others that say “set your boundaries” so that you can have good boundaries in your life. It’s an interesting thing that we have that kind of juxtaposition about boundaries.

All of us who live in the west are in some ways influenced by the culture of the west. People came out here partly because they didn’t want to be fenced in. So we have this sense of not wanting to be fenced in, to have no boundaries. How do we deal with those boundaries? What do we do? Do we just strive against them?

It’s interesting how many of our movies seem to be about people striving against boundaries. I even think of children’s movies such as *Aladdin*. You have a “street rat,” he calls himself, who is striving against his boundaries of being poor. He falls in love with the Sultan’s daughter. The whole movie is about breaking that boundary. We want to believe that those kinds of boundaries can be broken, that they are not really there. We want to believe that the registry that he had in the street wouldn’t be a boundary to actually creating that relationship, yet we might think about how unrealistic that is.

So if we begin to think about the boundaries that we have, how do you and I deal with them? Oftentimes I think that in my own life I tend to be one of those people who really does think I don’t want to be fenced in, I don’t want boundaries. But how do we go about getting rid of our boundaries?

At least one way of doing that is through having power. Our society suggests power and wealth give us freedom. It’s a pretty self-focused way of going, but boundaries can be overcome through power and wealth. And isn’t that really what Jesus is confronting when he is taken up on the mountain and shown the nations of the world? He’s being

offered all this power and wealth to be able to be in control, fame. Today we think of all those things: fame, power, and wealth. If we just had all those, we would be free.

Notice what Jesus corresponds with that power and wealth (also because he was asked to worship the devil). What I think he recognizes is that kind of freedom, all that power and wealth, really isn't ever complete freedom. It's always contingent, and so it is with this one. It's contingent on him worshiping the devil. It's contingent power. We can go after all kinds of earthly power, but it's contingent, too, and it's momentary. It's at least contingent on a moment in time, and soon gone. So where does he direct us instead? To worship God. How is that going to deal with our freedom? What's the freedom that we have? We don't have the freedom from gravity. We don't have the freedom from the direction of time. We don't have the freedom of space/place. What freedom do we have? We have a freedom in our lives to choose the direction it goes, what contingencies to notice and to follow, to bow down to, to guide our lives. It is in finding the what frees us, and for me freeing means to find the way that fits us. When we find the right way, there's a sense of knowing it, and it fits.

I have another other image of this. See if this works for you. If you think about a drainage system, or watershed, you know that there's always going to be a high point all the way around it. At that high point, the water is either going to flow out of the drainage system or down into the drainage system. So we've got the continental divide and we know that the water goes one way or the other. But inside that drainage system, that watershed, you have the drainage system for a particular river. What it feels to me like is those are boundaries in our lives. We can decide which drainage system we are going to be in if we go over particular hills. Bear with me and see if I can make sense of this for you.

Let me use something like respect as one of those things that might create a boundary for a drainage system. If I live within this one drainage system called respect, then that's how I live out my life. But I am confined to that draining system. If I think that I'm confined by living in that particular drainage system, I can go over the hill. I can find my way through and over.

What I want to suggest is that when we follow Christ, Christ is inviting us into a particular drainage system, a particular way of life. It's a way of life that opens up into a fertile plain that is well-watered, that invites us in and helps us experience the joy of life. But we don't have to stay in that drainage system. We can say no to following him. The issue is that if we go into another drainage system, there's no guarantee that it's going to be nice and wide and open. It might be that way for a while, but I'm suggesting that a lot of those drainage systems end up being very steep and it's easy to fall down the sides and to stumble and to enter into places that are hard to get through. Does that make sense?

Drainage systems are different. The way of our life will be different depending on what or who we decide to follow. So there are a variety of ways that we can go. Think about that in relationship to freedom. Which drainage system are we more free in: one that

we go into that gets really steep and craggy and hard to maneuver in, or one that opens up into a place that is verdant and supports life?

There is a freedom that comes with following Christ because it opens us up into that other kind of system, way of living. So like with respect, I can decide to think respect is something that restricts my life. If I have to be respectable, it restricts who I can be. I can step across into another system, but think about where it might lead. You can take almost any of the gifts of the Spirit—generosity, faithfulness, steadfastness, kindness—think about the kind of system they open us up into, that we get to follow Christ into. It's bounded. It's got edges. It's not always the same.

It's interesting to me that sometimes it feels like that landscape of one's life is something that goes with somebody into the circumstances of their lives. Sometimes you can enter into the presence of someone and feel like you've entered into a new landscape. You experience some of what they experience.

We live bounded lives, but within those boundaries we have a lot of choices. Some of those boundaries are boundaries we can choose to stay within, or not. When we follow Christ, I believe we are invited into that verdant landscape, that one that brings life to life.

We have to live within boundaries, but within those boundaries there is a certain freedom when we find the one that fits. We find that following Christ.

Let's pray:

Lord, this life is so interesting. Sometimes it seems so uncertain. Sometimes it seems so bounded. Help us to recognize that both are part of our lives, and the way to find our way is to follow you. You see the shape of the landscape before us and you help us live into the landscape of your love, of your grace, a landscape that begins to be part of who we are, that we carry with us. We join together in the landscape of your grace as we gather together in worship. We are thankful, Lord, for that landscape that you have given us that gives us life. Let us ever follow you, worship you, and not be tempted by power, wealth, and all the other false promises. Lead us to the place that only you can guide us. Lord, let us walk into the landscape of your kingdom. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.