

Love Thy Neighbor, Part 3: Sacred Boundaries

[Galatians 5:13-15](#)

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This is the third and final week in a three-week series on the biblical commandment to “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The first week, I offered that we cannot begin to embody the outward part of that ethic without simultaneously working on the inward part. To love our neighbor well, we must be rooted in a deep sense of God’s love for us.

And last week, using the story of The Good Samaritan, I reflected on the way that white supremacy and white privilege has interfered with and distorted love of neighbor, over the course of generations and generations. I wondered how majority white churches, such as ours, are called to respond to the ways our ancestors dishonored their enslaved, immigrant, and indigenous neighbors. This is a question we will continue to wrestle with as a community.

And now, in this third week, I’d like to discuss a subject that is sometimes left out of our conversations about care and compassion,

but which is crucial to living out the greatest commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. And that subject is *boundaries*.

First, a story.

Soon after I graduated from Wellesley, I was thrilled to find a room in a big rental house in Boston with five other young women. It was my first time living truly on my own, without the structure of family or college. My roommates were a mix of friends, classmates, and acquaintances, and they hailed from all over the world: Texas, California, Japan, Bangladesh. Many of them came from big families, with multiple siblings and scores of cousins and aunts and uncles.

There was an extroverted energy the house. We had a constant stream of people coming and going: boyfriends, girlfriends, siblings, classmates, co-workers. Spontaneous dinner parties with a dozen guests. Late-night conversations. Unpredictable schedules, with some of us working late nights and others working early shifts and others taking classes.

When I was in a good mood, I loved the energy and activity of my rental home.

But when I was feeling tired or depleted or just low-key, I found all that energy and activity completely overwhelming, and I'd hide my room for hours, earplugs stuffed in my ears.

See, I'd grown up in a house where quiet reigned and privacy was valued deeply. My parents were co-pastors of a prominent UCC church, very visible in the community. They worked long hours, together. So family time, at home, with no reference to work, was considered extremely precious. And because we lived in a parsonage right next door to the church, my parents asked the church to do two things: to honor their Sabbath day off, except in cases of emergency, and to call ahead before coming to the parsonage. No impromptu visits.

So this was the reality I came to expect: being home meant being in a calm, predictable environment, without people coming over much; and when people did come over, you always knew ahead of time.

My big rental house in Boston could not give me that.

I felt a deep sense of relief when, after a year and a half, I moved into a much smaller apartment with just two other roommates, close friends. They kept schedules similar to mine, and they also sometimes

retreated into their rooms and didn't speak for hours. And we lived together very happily for almost three years.

I share this story not to illustrate a right way living, or a wrong way. Everyone one of us carries expectations of how to live, how to interact with others; these particular internal measures of what makes us feel safe and grounded, and what makes us feel vulnerable and uncertain.

And these measures are influenced by so many things: our families of origin; our cultural backgrounds; our experiences, positive and negative.

In other words, we all come by our boundaries honestly.

“Boundaries,” as a relational concept, can feel like a buzzword. Like modern-day therapist-speak.

But bear with me: I propose that there is a deep wisdom behind the idea of boundaries—a wisdom that is ancient and universal. Indeed, I think boundaries are biblical.

First, let's agree on a definition: in the simplest sense, boundaries are edges; they are limits that mark the perimeter of an area—be it a physical area or topic or a sphere of activity.

In any kind of relationship, any human interaction, boundaries are the distinction of our own physical, emotional, and spiritual needs from the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of others.

So in other words, boundaries help respond to these questions: What is yours? What is mine? Where do *I* end and *you* begin? What is under *my* control and what is under *your* control?

The early church was very much caught up in these questions.

We heard just a small excerpt of Paul's letter to an early Christian community in Galatia. Galatia is in what is now central Turkey. This reading is from a time when most followers of Jesus were Jewish, meaning that they followed the law of the Torah. But in Galatia, non-Jews, Gentiles, are also joining the community. And they don't have at all the same expectations around diet and behavior and religious observance as Jews of the time.

And so this group of people, with very different boundaries, is trying to build a community together. Apparently one faction has suggested that as long as all members of the community follow Jewish ritual law, anybody can do anything they want with themselves and with others.

As you can imagine, this is causing some conflict.

In his letter, Paul tries to get them to reframe the whole issue. Being in community isn't about which specific rules you follow, he says. It's about an ethic, a practice, *a way of being* with each other.

And what is the ethic for the Galatians? Paul quotes Jesus quoting Hebrew scriptures: "The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

But this is important: love for neighbor—all neighbors—doesn't mean that anything goes. Loving isn't a huge basket that contains all behaviors. Love isn't a salve that covers all injuries. Love—even self-sacrificing love—isn't a license to take complete advantage of someone else.

It's a paradox, really: Paul says that we are to become "slaves to one another" through love; but we are simultaneously urged to "take care that [we] are not consumed by one another."

Or maybe it's not a paradox at all. Maybe love—the deep, abiding regard for self and others that Jesus taught us—maybe that kind of love can't exist when we consume each other. When we are

exhausted and overwhelmed. When the energy all flows in one direction.

I know many of you follow the work of Brené Brown, a social worker who has written extensively on the interplay between compassion and vulnerability. She once said [this](#):

“The most compassionate people that I've ever interviewed... happened to be the most boundaried. They happened to be the people who had very, very clear boundaries about what they were willing to do, what they were not willing to do, what they were willing to take on, and what they were not willing to take on. ...So, I don't think compassion is a relinquishing of boundaries. I think it is... much easier to be compassionate when we feel respected, and almost impossible to feel compassionate, and feel empathic for people, when we feel like we're being taken advantage of or when we're being sucked dry.”

Brown says that when we lack boundaries, our relationship with others has too much impact on how we see ourselves. We lose control of what we feel and become swept up in the feelings of others. And that breeds disappointment, resentment, anger, and burnout.

Now, I want to say this: I think that establishing and enforcing healthy boundaries is one of the hardest parts of life.

It's hard because boundaries are really hard to talk about openly. To define one's boundaries means to unearth deep-seated assumptions about how the world works and what it means to be in relationship.

And furthermore, boundaries are not static. They're situational. They change as we grow, as we experience new things, as the world around us evolves.

I'm convinced that everyone wrestles with some fundamental challenge when it comes to boundaries. For some of us, our boundaries are so rigid that we must learn to let down our guard, to take risks. For others, our boundaries are too porous, and perhaps we need to learn how to contain ourselves a bit better.

I encourage you, as you go out into the world this week, to think about *your* boundary origin stories. Where and how did you learn your expectations for relationships? When were those expectations challenged? What did you do? When were you able to compromise, and when did you have to hold fast to your own sense of what is best?

I also encourage all of us to remember Paul's charge to the Galatians, to love one another while not being consumed by one another. That interplay between love and boundaries is crucial not only to our health,

as a church, but to our ability to build the Kingdom of God in our world. We can't do the things we want to do—create a more just world for all—without the ability to give and take, to serve and be served, and to speak openly about what we need from ourselves and others.

Brené Brown [says](#) that “wholehearted [people]” cultivate relationships “that are based on mutual empathy, mutual respect, and shared vulnerability.”

Perhaps Paul himself understood that, given his writings about the need for mutual care and mutual respect in the congregations he encouraged. And more importantly, we must trust that God wants for *us* to be *wholehearted* people, grounded in love that crosses boundaries that need to be crossed, and respect for boundaries that need to be respected.

This is tough work, the work of a lifetime.

But thanks be to God, we have the chance to do so together.

Amen.