

Erasing the Line in the Sand

By: Meagan McLaughlin

September 29, 2024. Today's sermon is about lines in the sand. Jesus' disciples tried to draw a line in the sand in our gospel reading. And today, humans are still drawing lines in the sand, leaving out those most vulnerable. But new things are emerging, here in our own lives, at Christ Lutheran, and in our synod. The Spirit of God moves in all of us. God is erasing the lines, and we are called to help with the work.

Readings: [Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29](#), [James 5:13-20](#), [Mark 9:38-50](#)

*** Transcript ***

From childhood, since I was a young kid, my brain (perhaps like many of yours) has easily defaulted to “black and white” thinking. Something is right or wrong, this way or that way, in or out, backward or forward. It’s what I knew, what made me feel comfortable. Over the years I have mellowed considerably, but I can still slip into that either/or mindset pretty easily, especially when stress is high. It feels good to organize our thoughts, doesn't it? It feels good sometimes to draw that line in the sand and feel like we know what's happening, we know what's going in. It feels good to do that, because we know where we fit and we know where other people fit.

It is such a human thing to draw those lines to protect ourselves, and often we do it without even noticing that we're doing it. The notorious Ruth Bader Ginsberg pointed out in her first famous case in front of the Supreme Court that when she started studying at Harvard Law, female law students were regularly accused of stealing spots from the men. And there wasn't a women's bathroom on the law school campus. How more clear could the message be that women didn't belong in law school at that time? Women could own property starting in 1870, they could vote starting in 1920, but couldn't get a credit card in their own name until 1970. That was the year I was born, just 54 years ago. Black people were not guaranteed the right to vote until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — within many of our lifetimes.

And unfortunately, the church has not been immune to those lines in the sand. Some still feel today that only men should be ordained. LGBTQIA+ people aren't welcome, unfortunately, in many churches — even those that use the phrase “All are welcome,” which is why our status as a Reconciling in Christ church is so important. Even fewer are willing to call an LGBTQIA pastor.

But we hear in our scripture readings today that these lines that leave some in and some out of the world, and the church, and ministry, are far from new. The disciples, 2000 years ago, seeing people they didn't know and hadn't approved of casting out demons, feel the need to draw a line. And they try to stop them, and go to Jesus just to make sure that the trespassers don't interfere.

Progress has definitely been made since then. But still today, there is a lot of energy poured into marking lines and putting up barriers even to such essential rights as voting, out of fear that the lines may be crossed. And in the process, those most vulnerable are left to fight for the right to vote, to use a public restroom in peace, to access health care that they and their families and their doctors know is necessary and appropriate for them. Letting go of control, going outside of what's comfortable and familiar to us, can be terrifying. But the hard truth is that refusal to go outside of those comfortable lines can actually lead to death.

Family of faith, in case you hadn't noticed, we are moving again into a new thing. It's wonderful to see this renovation of our building, so long planned and anticipated, actually happening, isn't it? But it is a bit disruptive, to say the least. New things are emerging, here in our own lives and here at Christ Lutheran. And soon, our building will be accessible to anyone regardless of their physical capacity, and we will have a wonderful space for all of us to gather. Lines are being erased right in front of us, and isn't it exciting??

Our synod became Reconciling In Christ this summer by an overwhelming vote of the entire assembly. And I and a couple of others had the joy of attending the installation of an openly queer woman as bishop in the Minneapolis Synod this last weekend. This weekend, today, ELCA churches and many other denominations are showing up at Tower Grove Pride to proclaim that God's love embraces all people and doesn't recognize our human lines in the sand. Lines are being erased, here and in our larger church.

The Spirit of God embraces all people, no matter who you are, or where you're from. In Numbers today, God makes it clear that Moses' spirit was not just Moses', but was shared with all the people. It was actually God's spirit working through Moses. And the best part of this is that we know we are in this together. James calls us not to bear our burdens alone, but to share them in community.

And when the disciples complained about the interlopers who are stealing their thunder, Jesus proclaims in no uncertain terms that the disciples don't own the Spirit. In rather harsh language to our ears, Jesus warns them not to get in the way of those that the Spirit is calling, telling them it would be better to die than block the movement of the Spirit. It is so easy for us to get stuck in our own ideas, and Jesus goes to an extreme today to show how important it is to allow the Spirit to open our minds, rather than trying to reign the Spirit in. We humans sometimes draw lines, but God always erases them.

It can feel a little chaotic, letting go as the Spirit moves and leads us on unknown paths. The disciples certainly felt anxious about the impact of random people sharing Jesus' ministry. But that is how the Spirit works. Jesus told Nicodemus 2000 years ago that the Spirit blows where it will, and today we celebrate that the Spirit is still blowing among us in new ways.

God told Moses, and Jesus told the disciples, and we are discovering today, that the Spirit of God moves in all of us. And every one of us are invited to share, in little ways and in big ways, the love, grace, and justice God is bringing to this world. God is busy erasing lines, ensuring that all people freely share in the abundance of love, mercy, and justice in the world. And we are called to take a deep breath, courageously pick up our erasers, or our rakes, or our hands, and help with the work. So buckle up! With the Spirit in charge, it is bound to be quite a ride!

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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