

## **“Life within the Limits”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
September 26, 2021 – Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 21  
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Once upon a time, there was a small seaside town that faced a big problem. The picturesque little town was wedged between the sea and a giant cliff, with rolling hills rising above the cliff. Many people came to visit the little town because of its idyllic setting. There was one road that connected the town to the outside world, a road that was carved into the face of the cliff and then wound through the hills above it. All along the road, there were places where people could park and take in the spectacular views, and this was a popular activity for the townsfolk and visitors and many picnics were enjoyed along the cliff and hills above the town. The big problem faced by the little town was that people kept driving off of the road above it, perhaps because they missed a turn in the rain or dark or because of their brakes went out or because they were busy texting while driving or were otherwise distracted, and those who drove off the road ended up crashing right into the town below.

The town elders gathered together to address the problem and decided that because so many people were becoming injured by these horrific crashes -- drivers, passengers, and townspeople alike -- the town needed to build a hospital. And so the little town built a hospital with a state-of-the-art trauma unit, which became a very busy place caring for all the people injured in and by the cars that kept driving off of the road and crashing into town. The hospital was so busy, in fact, that soon after it was built, they ran out of room to care for all of the injured.

The town elders gathered again to address this problem. Most of the elders wanted to expand the hospital or to build a second one. One of the elders, however, had another idea: She thought that perhaps they could install guard rails all along the road above town, which would prevent people from driving over the cliff and getting injured in the first place. While this seemed like a good idea, the other town elders were horrified by the thought of having an ugly guard rail ruining the beautiful vistas along the road above their town, and so they voted down her idea and chose instead to build a second hospital. Later, they built a

third and then a fourth -- all to deal with those injured by the cars crashing into their town. But at least they preserved their beautiful views!

This story seems silly, but also sadly familiar, for this is so often what we silly townspeople do. We often end up dealing with injuries to ourselves and others that we could have prevented in the first place but chose not to for one bad reason or another. Placing guardrails in our lives, that could perhaps mess up our beautiful vision of boundless freedom, is something we often choose not to do. Like our neighbors to the north of us in New Hampshire, we'd rather live free or die, baby (or is that live free *and* die?)! Sadly, our passion for maintaining limitless personal freedom causes much harm to us and those we love.

For while we love the notion of being boundlessly free, as depicted in a thousand western movies by the lonely soul atop a horse, moseying through the dusty, wide-open western canyonlands, this romantic notion is neither true nor healthy. None of us are riding through life on our own and are free to do whatever we want whenever we want however we want to do it. No, we all belong to communities with other people. We were formed by communities, by the families, towns, schools, and churches in which we were raised, and throughout our lives, we remain connected to others in community, and we are not free to do whatever we want at the expense of others with whom we are connected.

Because we belong to others, we care for others, and we limit ourselves for their good and for our own. We place guardrails in our lives in order to be a blessing to others and not a curse to them. This is why we are wearing these again (holding up a face covering) as long as we have a high rate of community spread of Covid-19: I know that if I'm infected with the virus, and, gladly, I can tell you I am not, as just confirmed by a Covid test taken on Friday, this face covering can catch most of my germs as I breathe out, making it much less likely that you will become infected by them. And this is why I've encouraged vaccination from this pulpit and will continue to do so. It's about doing what you can to protect others in your midst by limiting the ability of the virus to spread to others through you. And because I care deeply about the hospital workers in our communities and their work to promote the healing and health of others, I certainly do not want to take from them and my community by ending up in the hospital myself with something

I might have prevented by getting the guardrails simply provided by a shot in the arm.

Because we care for one another, we limit ourselves in many other ways. One of these is by doing all that we can to protect the vulnerable ones in our midst from abuse. Sadly, in the news each day are stories of people harmed by those who have used their positions of power and trust to abuse others. So common still are reports of clergy, teachers, coaches, doctors, and community youth program leaders abusing the access they have been given to our young people, causing great harm to our children and youth, harm that lasts a lifetime, harm that cannot be quickly and easily patched up in the hospital at the bottom of the cliff. This is why we limit who has access to our children, and why we put guardrails in place for those who do have access to our children, limits like not allowing an adult, even a trusted adult, to be alone with a young person in a non-public setting. Having spent decades working as a youth minister, I can tell you that these limits cause many inconveniences and make doing ministry difficult. But there is life within the limits as creating a healthier environment for our children and youth is life-giving for them and for all of us.

Because we care deeply about the health and well-being of our children and all people, we will limit ourselves so as to not put stumbling blocks on people's paths towards Christ as we are instructed by Jesus in our gospel reading from Mark. We limit ourselves so as to not put barriers in our own paths towards Christ. We limit ourselves because we are serious about our work to bring healing to one another and the community around us. We pray for this, as James teaches us to, and we work for this by doing all that we can to promote the health and well-being of one another. By living within these limits, we "have salt in ourselves," preserving ourselves and one another, and expanding God's peace in our lives and in the world. So let us always use our beautiful freedom to love one another and bless one another by sharing life within the limits. Amen.