

“Blessings Beyond Bounds”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 2, 2025 - Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

[Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30](#)

In American football, the ultimate game of which is just a week away, there are clearly defined boundaries. The field of play has plenty of markings within it, such as four sets of hash marks identifying every single yard up and down the field, lines running across the full width of the field every five yards, and numbers every ten yards indicating how far away from the nearest end zone these lines are, but the most easily visible markings of all are the six-foot-wide lines indicating where the field of play ends. Everything within this wide stripe that makes up the side- and end-lines of the field is considered to be in the field of play, but any game activity on or beyond these clearly-visible lines is considered to be out-of-bounds, is (or is supposed to be) prohibited, and will (or is supposed to) result in a 15-yard penalty to the team of an offending player.

Just as the game of football is played on a field with clearly defined boundaries, so is the event of life. Most of the boundaries placed on people's living, however, are not ordained by God, but have been invented and are maintained by people.

Each Sunday, when we get together to worship, we read aloud words from our Bible, usually some from the scriptures of the Hebrew people and then some from the writings of communities of those who were followers of Jesus. These words, from both testaments, provide us with the wisdom of people of different communities who sought to live within boundaries of what they considered to be appropriate for the people of God as they sensed God revealing this to them. As special, elevated words of inspired individuals and groups of our spiritual ancestors, we continue to hold these words to be sacred, including them, and then teachings about them, at the very center of our worship gatherings so that we may seriously consider anew what boundaries (and other markers) God is putting in our lives and the life we share that we may best experience and share the fullness of God's grace as we live.

Problems and conflict arise, however, when what we consider God to be revealing to us differs from what other communities or individuals consider to be God's

revealed truth. There are very real differences between us and those who take selected portions of our scriptures, many of which are full of symbolism and other poetic language and all of which were written by people who lived in very different times and places, and read them as though they are to be understood by us literally, without interpretive filters, just as we are today. Here, however, we take the words of our scriptures seriously, but not literally, so that we can better understand the ways and beliefs of our ancestors in faith and consider them in our own ongoing conversation about what God has revealed and is revealing now.

We hold this approach to our scriptures because Jesus did, which caused conflict in his day with those who had a different interpretive approach. We read about this in today's lesson from the gospel of Luke, which tells us about the beginning of his work of ministry in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth as he read and then taught from a passage of scripture from the book of Isaiah about God's liberating work in the lives of people. Jesus taught that the day had come when the blessings of God were being offered to *all* people, and that those who had for so long been considered to be out of bounds and so unable to receive the gifts of God were now welcome on the field of God's grace. What really riled up the crowd gathered in the synagogue that day, all of whom knew Jesus as a member of their community, was when he explained that his message, which challenged a narrow interpretation of their scriptures, would be rejected by them, as they did not want the boundaries to be opened up to all people, and that God's grace would be poured out then on those they considered to be unworthy outsiders, just as in the past the great prophets Elijah and Elisha served lowly, gentile outsiders of Sidon and Syria.

This radical message, that the playing field was being opened up to all, messed with the boundaries that other religious leaders sought to maintain above all else. So, considering Jesus and his message to be a threat to their own traditions, in furious rage they marched him out of the synagogue to a high cliff, where they sought to respond to his perceived penalty with the ultimate punishment. As we know, the crowd was not successful in that moment, but this would eventually happen when Jesus was killed on a Roman cross.

Unfortunately, people responding to perceived threats with violence has been a common way of people since the beginning of time. And those who have called

for others to see the out-of-bounds folks as actually recipients of God's grace as fellow children of God have been no exception. Such prophets have often been the targets of violence, because they have the most power to enact change by challenging the human-created boundaries and calling out for others to do so as well. This was true in the times of the prophets of Israel, in the day of Jesus, and throughout the centuries since then, including the time we live in today. But regardless of the response, God calls us to see in the sacred words we share a boundary-breaking message of liberation for all people and to continue Jesus' work of proclaiming this good news to all and doing and supporting work that lifts up the lowliest among us and around the world.

As so many in world and here in this nation oppose this message today through selfish and cruel actions against those they consider to be insignificant outsiders, let us strengthen our own efforts to use whatever resources we have and those we share to bless all people everywhere, for in God's stadium, the boundaries are wide and deep, and all who gather are included on the field of God's grace. Let us be so inclusive and gracious. Amen.