



Foundational Essay

CROSS BORDERS

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INTRODUCTION

Typically, borders are lines that separate two geographical areas: two countries, regions, cities, neighborhoods, and so on. For this study we are considering borders as points of separation, the lines imagined or real that separate *us* from *them* and *you* from *me*. God's creation is a full, rich, diverse place, a place where flourishing is inextricably entwined with that diversity. Our differences are cause for celebration and our unique voices compose a holy chorus. Yet humanity tends to react to difference as though it is scary rather than sacred, erecting borders in response. In biblical and Christian history, those borders—and in particular crossing them—become frequent sites of not only conflict but also action, transcendence, and transformation.


Borders were ubiquitous, provocative, and divisive in biblical times. Not much has changed. Then as now, people of faith were often forced to encounter the other and decide through the lens of their culture and faith how they would respond to otherness. In Scripture, we see over and over again the stories of borders between people of different faiths, cultures, classes, genders, and ethnicities. Even communities that wandered had boundaries that they carried with them.

The people of God are called over and over again to cross borders in order to live more faithfully, in relationship with one another and with God. We often see these people encountering the other, rejecting and being rejected, falling back on stereotypes and snap judgments, allowing fear to fuel decision making. Yet, again and again, people of faith are pushed, pulled, invited, and commanded by God to embrace the fullness of humanity.

One of the, if not the biggest, pivotal moments in the Old Testament is the exodus, where God rescued the Hebrews suffering unbearably under the rule of Pharaoh. The Hebrews lived and were enslaved in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:41) during which time the group became diverse through marriages, fictive kinships, adoptions, and so forth. These people adopted the history, faith, and traditions of Jacob's people. While enslaved, they were forced to build cities for the empire of Pharaoh. Their many cries for help



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reached God, who heard and led them to freedom. When they crossed the border and escaped Pharaoh's army's grip, they wandered in the desert for forty years. During that time, many of the borders that existed among them were crossed, and one people emerged with a common law and a land.

Borders were also challenged and crossed multiple times by Jesus and the growing movement that followed him. Like the Hebrews before them, they were generally not people of power, crossing borders to be nice to their poorer neighbors. Rather, they were the underclass, taking huge risks in crossing borders to spread the gospel, subvert the empire, and teach a law of love rather than division. In Galatians 3:28, the apostle Paul insists, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Following Jesus demands that we follow him outside of our comfort zones and step into the unknown.

Here, we will focus on four aspects of the ways borders are crossed in Scripture and in the Christian life:


- Leave Your Comfort Zone
- Embrace Relationships
- Challenge Exclusion
- Speak God's Language of Love

LEAVE YOUR COMFORT ZONE


A comfort zone isn't necessarily a trivial thing, like insisting on only our preferred brand of coffee or refusing to stay in hotels that aren't five-star establishments. Comfort zones are real and determine much about our sense of well-being and wholeness in the world. Our comfort zones vary day by day, experience by experience, expanding to the global community and contracting to the confines of our own minds. Our comfort zone is where we feel safe, and, well, comfortable. Physical comfort is a need, often a priority, for anyone. Yet, for dominant or affluent cultures, it tends to become a demand. For those with less or those who are marginalized, physical comfort may not be obtainable, yet there is still a desire for safety and sameness. The predictability of knowing what our food will taste like, what our neighbors' voices will sound like, that customs will be respected by everyone in our vicinity, that we will have the reliability of what has become familiar, brings us comfort. Comfort makes it easier to be, and it can be a great internal struggle to resist that ease for the sake of something less familiar.

Generally, society admires people who leave their comfort zones. We like adventurers, innovators, and people of good will who take risks. It is important to people of faith that we leave our comfort zones to do good, never harm. After all, invading armies also leave their comfort zones to get rich while destroying anything in their way. Society often romanticizes their gall. That is not the kind of crossing borders Christians promote.


Throughout the Bible, we learn of people leaving their comfort zones. Abram and Sarai leave Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan (Genesis 11:1-9). Rebekah leaves her homeland of Haran to marry Isaac in Canaan (Genesis 24). Moses first left his comfort zone as a prince to protect a slave and then again left the comfort zone of the sheep pastures to lead the enslaved Hebrews (Exodus 2:15). Joseph and Mary left the comfort of home in Nazareth and, then again, the village of relatives in Bethlehem. Paul and the apostles traveled extensively, spreading the gospel.




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Jesus crossed the borders of his cultural comfort zones all the time, despite the dangers. As a poor person, he dared to cross social, economic, and religious boundaries throughout his recorded ministry and engaged folks from all backgrounds. He changed the people he met, and he was changed by them, each encounter serving as an exemplification of the power of moving beyond what feels comfortable, familiar, and safe. Even as Jesus lived out this testimony to the life of border crossing, his early followers struggled with the practicalities of it, just as we do today. In their world, welcoming Gentiles, people who were not Jewish, into the nascent faith community meant sacrificing comfort and certainty in favor of openness that holds potential for great risk as well as great reward. Some of these Gentiles were from privilege and might overwhelm the mainly poor Jewish Christian community.



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In Acts 11:1–18, Peter reported to the church at Jerusalem that he had been engaged in a deep, personal struggle with his own comfort zone. He'd been caught in the push/pull of the Christ followers, demanding answers about what they perceive as hypocrisies about who is in and who is out in this fledgling community. Taking a page from the pedagogy of Christ, Peter told them a story, recounting a vision he experienced in which it was revealed to him that the food he had previously thought was profane was in fact deemed clean by God, and therefore Peter accepted this new truth. Just then, three men were introduced to his life and would accompany him as he put this new wisdom into practice. Peter learned a holy lesson and was eager to impart it to his fellow followers: “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us” (Acts 11:12). Peter’s comfort zone got left behind in favor of a calling to a deeper faith, one that even included the Gentiles, saying, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:17–18).

Christ affirms that the reward far outweighs the risk, and indeed calls each of us to leave our comfort zones, making no distinction between *them* and *us*, and instead going wherever we are called. Once we have left our comfort zones, we begin to encounter the other.

Every church and worshiping community is founded by people who are willing to leave their comfort zone and gather strangers. Many churches regularly remember the founders of their church, people who crossed borders to establish the congregation. Today, many churches are leaving their familiar worship and membership comfort zones and becoming more multicultural. In multicultural churches, all members leave their comfort zones to forge a new type of community. People sing songs in languages foreign to them. They eat foods that seem strange to them but are the comfort foods of their fellow Christian siblings. On a larger level, local, state, national, and world councils of churches bring together Christians of very diverse theological stances in order to dialogue and serve others in unison. In more recent history, interfaith dialogues and communities are places where everyone must leave the comfort zone of their faith tradition and find how to serve God together and promote peace and justice. These are just some of the many ways Christians leave their comfort zones to cross borders.

EMBRACE RELATIONSHIPS

When people are willing to cross borders and truly meet the other, relationships are established that can change the world. Of course, differences do not disappear simply because we have chosen to be courageous and open.

When many of us hear someone talk about the biblical book of Ruth, we immediately think of the last wedding we attended where the familiar verses are read and Ruth swears to Naomi, her mother-in-law, “Where you go, I will go; / where you lodge, I will lodge, / your people shall be my people / and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). But before that moment, after losing both her sons, Naomi, a Jewish woman, has an emotionally charged moment with her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Naomi recognizes the practical challenges of the three of them moving forward in life together. They are three vulnerable widows of different communities, faiths, and cultures, and she attempts to send the two younger women back to their families of origin. She blesses them both and, amidst kisses and tears, wishes to send them back to their own homelands. Initially, both women protest their mother-in-law’s wishes, but Naomi insists. In the end, they weep together, Orpah kisses Naomi one last time and leaves, while Ruth clings to her.

The differences between Orpah, Naomi, and Ruth are not trivial. Nor do they pretend these differences are unimportant or nonexistent. Naomi recognizes just how deep the challenges will be for herself and her daughters-in-law if they continue together in the absence of the men who bound their lives together. They are also from two different geographical regions, and it may have been safer for each to live in their own region. The weight of the decisions before them can be felt in the passion of Naomi’s pleas, and the tears Orpah sheds. In the end, Ruth decides that the differences cannot outweigh the love she feels, and so she and Naomi choose relationship, despite the religious and cultural borders that come with that relationship.

Our differences are not trivial, as the particularly divisive social and political borders of the US reveal. Hundreds of years of racially based animus borne out in every aspect of public life are swept away, white-washed as ancient history, or at least not as something that requires personal transformation. The brutal imbalance of the rich and poor under capitalist structures is often ignored or explained away with references to the importance of the Protestant work ethic, or worse, a promotion of prosperity gospel messages. The ravages of criminalizing addiction wreak havoc on communities that are over-policed and under-resourced, repackaged as the mere greed of thugs. Marginalized communities are convinced to vote against their own interests, sold on the fear of the other.

What has been often dismissed as differences of opinion or political ideology has manifested into deep entrenchment with deadly consequences. It is not enough to pretend those differences do not exist and feign relationships by ignoring difficult topics. The path to peace, as modeled by Christ, is in the acknowledgment of difference while still choosing relationships and choosing love. By choosing relationships, the destructive power of difference loses its stranglehold, the other becomes known in their complexity, dialogue can happen, and potential areas of agreement found.




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Boundaries, rootedness, and a sense of community are all valuable and help us cope with the complexity of our world. Certainly, there is great value in tradition, and in the ways our cultural norms help us navigate life, build community, understand, and be understood. The problem arises when adherence to tradition and cultural norms takes priority and precedence over the value of human relationships. When we attempt to wrap tradition or communities in borders that exclude others, we lose the plot of Christ's directions. If the church can behave as Ruth and Naomi do, choosing right relationship over tradition and social norms, then the church can adhere to the new norm as established by God, rooted in the promise of our loving commitment to one another. In God, we have something more than tradition, and Ruth's and Naomi's love and commitment to one another is one embodiment of that godly way of being.

Thank God for the many examples of Christians crossing borders and embracing relationships over time. Belonging to a church or worshiping community involves embracing people from different social, racial, and economic realities. Congregational mission trips, either local or beyond, often challenge people on all sides to embrace others who look and think differently. Churches from radically different parts of a city join in long-term partnerships where, over time, relationships are deepened, and mission happens. Sometimes, when there are deep divisions in churches over issues important to all, a commitment to stay together and talk them through over time can melt warring hearts and solutions appear that were not possible without the trust of relationships.



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CHALLENGE EXCLUSION



In the beginning of chapter 14 in Mark, the Gospel author reminds us that the death of Jesus is looming, a preemptive ghost over the proceedings in this chapter. The chief priests and scribes are seeking an opportunity to arrest and execute him, while navigating the holy festivals and hoping to avoid a riot. The atmosphere is heated, and Jesus knows what is coming for him. On one of his final nights, he has gathered with friends at Simon the leper's home in Bethany, and a woman anoints him with expensive oil, breaking an alabaster jar and the disciples' expectations all at once.

The disciples react with anger toward the woman, scolding her that her wastefulness could have benefited the poor tremendously, insinuating that that would have been the right way to show her love for Christ. Jesus, however, is honored by the gesture. He tells his disciples to leave her alone, naming the hard truth in the room that his time with them is short and her expression of love is such a great kindness that it will become a part of the narrative whenever his final days are recounted in the world. The woman left her comfort zone and crossed a cultural border and was rebuked by all but Jesus. Jesus challenged her exclusion and the line, between him and her anyway, was overcome.

We good church folks often assume we have a clear understanding of what God wants and, interestingly, it usually looks like exactly what we are already doing. Of course, we believe our approaches to mission, education, community engagement, and worship are in line with the call of Christ; that's why we do them the way that we do. Yet this passage from Mark 14 reminds us that much of Christ's recorded ministry is spent challenging the expectations of those around him, including his dearest friends. Here, he is

challenging the presupposition that there is only one right way to love him, that anyone, even his disciples, has the right to act as gatekeeper around him. Yes, they are the disciples, but who are they to decide who can love Christ and how that love can be expressed?

From the quiet rebuke in Mark 14, to the furious response to turning the temple into simply a marketplace, to drawing a line in the sand, Jesus consistently challenges the expectations of the pious elite. When he delivers these challenges, it is always on the side of a more expansive notion of acceptance and inclusion.

Today, churches everywhere have the opportunity to hear that rebuke and reexamine the ways we determine the way to show our love and worship. Do we determine who is among the deserving poor by their gratitude or their willingness and ability to assimilate into the culture of our church family? Do we remain open to the Spirit, or do we insist on our traditions regardless of their connection to the reality of our neighborhoods and needs? It seems all too easy for communities to rest in the comfortable and familiar, ignoring the ways we have institutionalized exclusion, yet the call Jesus extends challenges exclusion wherever we find it.

SPEAK GOD’S LANGUAGE OF LOVE

The story of Pentecost, seven weeks after Easter, is well-worn in the preaching and teaching cycles of the church. The story of the birth of the church is celebrated in churches and denominations across the map as an annual tradition. In the moment of Pentecost, vividly described in Acts 2, a tremendous sound like the rush of wind sweeps through the house, and something akin to fire laps at each person until, suddenly, this devout group of Jewish people from all different regions can understand one another. They don’t just hear in their own language; they begin to speak in other tongues, speaking in the native language of each. They were, understandably, amazed, skeptical, and confused. Peter speaks up and recognizes what is happening as the incarnation of a prophecy of Joel’s: “In the last days it will be, God declares, / that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, / and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, / and your young men shall see visions, / and your old men shall dream dreams. / Even upon my slaves, both men and women, / in those days I will pour out my Spirit; / and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17, based on Joel 2:28).

Stories like this one can lose their wonder with familiarity, but it is difficult to miss that something tremendous is happening. God is building something new in the moment of Pentecost, and something new is happening every time we read it again; we are learning to speak a new language.

In churches where we sing the same hymns, leave the liturgy unchanged, and resist changing anything from our coffee cups to our curriculum, we close the door on the rushing wind of the Holy Spirit. But when we leave the door open, even a crack, the Spirit tends to do astounding things. A predominantly white church’s racial equity group decides to start visiting and worshiping alongside a local Black church, building friendships. A small group of Christian women and Muslim women decide to sit down together and read the Quran and the Bible together, discovering shared stories and the basis of community from which to ask questions and grow in faith. A church decides to trust the youth of their community to lead them in



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addressing climate change, matching their passion and sense of urgency with trust and commitment. In these and the countless other everyday miracles of ministry, the Holy Spirit rushes in and tunes our ears and tongues to speak a new language of love.

That new language is rooted in our shared commitment to Christ, who supersedes our national identities, our denominational allegiances, and any other category in which we might place ourselves or be placed. The future of the church is now as it was in the day of Pentecost; it contains multitudes. The kingdom is not monotonous or homogeneous, but multilingual, multinational, all identities and races and ways of being in the world sharing the common cup. The church is called to be the place where we learn to risk crossing barriers and truly encounter others, learning to speak a new language in which we might give thanks for the gift that is our diversity as a foretaste of what is yet to come.

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