

Imagine you are sitting on a park bench. A stranger comes and sits at the far end of the bench. How would you feel? Then they move halfway towards you. How would you feel now? Then they move right next to you, so their face is only inches from your face? What would you do?

Imagine you go home today and your next door neighbours are sitting in your back yard. What would you say to them? What would happen if, next day, you arrive home to find them sitting in the kitchen, eating food from your fridge with their children rummaging through your drawers and playing with your stuff? What would you do? Would you feel the same as the three bears in the story of Goldilocks, when they found Goldilocks sleeping in their beds?

Everyone has boundaries. No one likes to be squashed with other people hemming you in on all sides. We have an invisible border running all the way around the surface of our bodies and we feel uncomfortable if people force themselves too close. Most people have a place that they call home. Somewhere they can go to close the door behind them. They feel safe there. No one is allowed in unless they have permission. No one can take things unless they ask. If you want to be alone then you can be. If you want friends, then you can invite them in.

I'm not a particularly liturgical minister. I'm not always in tune with the calendar of the church. I know when Lent and Advent start but I'm not always aware of the other liturgical dates like Ascension or Reign of Christ. However, this week I pulled out my handy dandy calendar that Helen sold to me on behalf of the Sunday School and learned that this is Rogation Sunday – also known as Rural Life Sunday in more modern times. The first time I encountered the word rogation was in David Niven's autobiography when he talks about stealing a turnip to replant because his didn't grow for Rogation Sunday.

Hundreds of years ago the church had a festival called Rogation Sunday. It was a day when the priest, in his violet robes, accompanied by the villagers, walked around the boundaries of each parish. In the 17th century Ordnance Survey maps were not always clear on the lines of demarcation between parishes. The procession on Rogation Sunday came to be known as the parish perambulation or beating the bounds. If the villagers encountered a hedge in the way of the boundary line, they broke it down. If a house was built across the boundary line a window was broken and the mayor would pass his mace through it. If the boundary ran along the middle of a river, the vicar and the mayor would be put in a boat and would row along it. Often at various points, boys would be "bumped".

During the procession, boys were pushed or bumped against prominent marks and boundary stones, rolled in briars and ditches or thrown into ponds. The

reason? To ensure they never forgot the boundaries. The Victorians made the action more civilized by beating objects instead of people.

The whole idea of Rogation began well before Christianity. The Romans had a festival called the 'robignalia' in which the people went through their fields and prayed to the gods to protect their crops. They especially prayed to a god known as Terminus – the Roman god of fields and boundaries. When Christianity became the religion of Europe, the festival of robignalia (now rogation) continued but Jesus was now the focus of the prayers. The word "rogare" was Latin for "to ask". Scripture reference for rogation was based on John 16:23 *"I will tell you for certain that the Father will give you whatever you ask for in my name. You have not asked for anything in this way before, but now you must ask in my name. Then it will be given to you, so that you will be completely happy."* The purpose of the celebration was the same in both the Roman and Christian faith – to ask God's blessing on the crops and to check that no one had trespassed in any way across the border of each parish. It was a reminder of a time when people lived closer to the soil and had a dependence on God for their economical well-being. I suppose that's why it is now called Rural Life Sunday.

We are a rural church, we have guests here from other rural areas just up the Ottawa valley, so it made sense to me to recognize that here is a Sunday just for us – the hicks as my husband affectionately calls us country folk. However, whether we are farmers looking over fields or businessfolk looking over computers, we still seek the same God.

This brings to mind an image of our progressing down the road, declaring everything within the geographic boundaries of this church to be specially set apart and consecrated as holy, pronouncing to every soul we meet the liberation offered through the mediation of Jesus and staking our claim for the working out of the plan of salvation and the bringing of God's kingdom to earth. Sound burdensome? Yes. Sound old-fashioned? Possibly. But I received an invitation this week to become part of a Prayer Leader's Consult in the city of Ottawa and one of the projects that this group wants to get off the ground is an every-street prayer walk doing exactly what I just described. Sounds like Rogation Sunday is making a comeback, if in a somewhat revised manner.

As I said, Rogation Sunday is about walking the boundaries. We all have boundaries, we all need boundaries. Bookstores are full of resources for setting and keeping healthy boundaries. These books tell us when to say "yes" and when to say "no". They encourage you to "take control" of your life and to "stop hiding from love". The objective is becoming separate, individual and autonomous.

Healthy boundaries are a good thing. They help us live more fulfilling lives, respecting others and respecting ourselves. They help us overcome depression, codependency, and anxiety and to avoid unnecessary anger and hurt.

And yet, as good as healthy boundaries can be, and as useful as they are - Jesus never seemed too impressed with boundaries. He had an encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well, an event which had very clear boundaries regarding Jews and Samaritans intermingling (or rather failing to). Turns out the Samaritans were more interested in hearing what Jesus had to say than the people of His own home town were.

(Read John 15: 1-10)

Jesus talks about Himself as the vine and we are the branches attached to that vine. He is not talking about keeping a healthy balance between work and home, not about maintaining respectful distances from others, not about putting boundaries around ourselves for our protection. Jesus says He is the vine and as the branches we are part of Him and He is part of us. Knit together, or grafted to one another. For Jesus it's all about being in relationship, connected, a part of the larger body, walking together arm in arm for God's Kingdom. That's why I feel blessed to have performed this particular baptism today. These are my cousins, my aunt, my parents and brother. These are my biological family, but by being here today, by asking to have Lily baptized in your presence, my family has invited you into our family circle and in the promises you as a congregation made in the baptism, you have included them in your spiritual family circle.

We are all part of one vine, all connected, all interrelated. When we realize this we stop trying to work for our own selfish gain at the expense of others, for we know that harm done to any one of us is harm ultimately done to all of us. When we realize we are all part of one vine, we begin to draw nourishment from each other, instead of competing with one another.

This is not to say that the kinds of things we call "boundary issues" don't have merit, or that "healthy boundaries" as society understands them are not good things. If the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Serbs and Croatians, the Afghans, the Iraqi and the Americans realized they were part of one vine this world might stop trying to hack each other to pieces, realizing violence only serves to sever them from their common humanity. If politicians or Christians or any of us realized we are all part of one vine, we would search out ways to cooperate with each other, rather than try to conquer one another for our own interests.

The United Church creed that we said during Lily's baptism this morning says this about boundaries; "We live in God's world...We are called to be the church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus..." We are connected to each other and all of creation through the vine that is Christ.

Mardi Tindal, the current Moderator of the United Church indicates how she forgot this connection. She was on a beach at Naramata Center near Lake Okanagan. It was her first official stop as Moderator and she was to lead

worship outdoors. She says that they stood outdoors within a cathedral of light reflected by earth, lake and sky (definitely a moment to contemplate the connection between us as God's created beings and the rest of God's creation). Every one was gathered for worship and as she put on the Moderator's stole the fringe of it touched the sand at her feet. Her immediate reaction was to gasp and blurt out to the crowd "Oops – don't tell anyone it touched the ground." That was right after General Council had heard her speak about God's call to listen deeply to soul, one another and creation. All connected. No difference between what is sacred and what is not in God's world. No boundaries between humans and the rest of God's creation.

At the beginning of the sermon I asked what you would do if a stranger sat right up next to you on a park bench. I asked what you would do if you came home and found your neighbour sitting in your kitchen eating your food. Would you call the police? What would you do though if your neighbour said "Please can you help us – we've lost our jobs, we have no money, we have no food. Can you let us stay until we earn enough money to look after ourselves?" Would you let them stay?

Would you set up boundaries and say this is for God, this is of God and this is not? Would you say that about people, about your responsibility to others, to the world? Or would you remember that you are connected to the one vine. It's Rogation Sunday – a festival that might seem dated today, but it is still a reminder that as the branches of the one vine we are asking for God's blessing, we are asking for His justice in preserving appropriate bounds, we are asking to be made charitable in how we walk, live and neighbourly accompany one another in life and we are asking God to make us charitable to those who venture within our boundaries.

We are responsible for those within our boundaries, and in God's world the boundaries are very large.