

Calvary United Methodist Church
May 19, 2019

INVISIBLE FENCES
Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

John 13:31-35

We'll ask that our kids come forward. Hi, girls and guy. Would you like to help here? Okay. And would you like to help here? Okay. You sit here and...would you mind sitting here? You don't want to sit there? Can we sit there with you? Okay. Come over here with me. I have a contest for you: who gets to be the winner, okay? We'll put you on that side and then you can come over here, okay?

Now, what I want you to do is I want you to take those blocks and with only your index finger move them into the basket. Do you think that could be done? Don't think so? What do you think? Do you want to try it? Well, give it a try. You can move it there that way? Can you get it into the basket, just one finger? Can't use two. Think they can do it? Just one finger. It's hard, isn't it?

Okay, bring the two blocks over here. Okay. Now, I mean, if you could balance it on one finger, you know, that would be good, but that's really hard isn't it? It doesn't want to do that. So, how do we do this impossible task? Let me show you. Put this one here and this one here, okay? Now, put your index finger there and yours there. Now push, pick them up and put them in. Can you do this? One finger, right? Get it into the basket. Alright! Everybody give them
a
hand.

Okay, come sit down here. You did good. You both won. That was great and that's what teamwork...you girls want to try it? Okay. We'll put it here. Think you can do that? Okay, can you do this, girls? Push hard. You can do it. (Children speak.) Sister always work well together. (Children speak.) Alright, you did good.

Well, this is called teamwork and this is really important for a church because unless we work together, well, if you don't stand together, someone said, you fall apart and that's true, but it would be impossible by yourself, right? But it's not impossible when two people do it. You want to try it with me? Okay. Push hard now, alright, you can do this. Move it own here. Okay? Alright! You did good.

God is partnering with us so that all the work that we do we do with him and he works with us and it doesn't take much more than your finger to do that. So, when you work together, you work together really well with your sister, right? That's the right answer. She is looking. So, when we work together, God can do amazing things.

So, wasn't that really a cool thing to do? You know, you figured it out: wait, I can't do this by

myself. But each of us used one finger. Boom, right in.

There are a lot of scriptures in the Bible about that, but it's just practical. So, let's pray:

So, thank you, Lord, that when we work with you, we can do a lot of stuff and it's great. Bless our kids and help us to work together for their good always. In Christ. Amen.

Okay, now a lot of people have worked together this morning to make this service happen. You may take something for your sister, yeah. A lot of people work really hard, we don't do it alone. Okay. Thanks.

Message:

Would you please join me in a word of prayer? Dear Lord, help us, guide us, speak to our hearts from your Word. We give you thanks that you call us ever to be a part the expanding circle of your Kingdom, to learn how to love and be with one another in ways that lift up and heal and bless. From these scriptures, Lord, teach us what that means. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Well, down the street on a corner property from our house there is a big beautiful Yellow Lab. I know that's a Golden Retriever, but it was the best picture I could find. This Lab is named Cash. He probably weighs about eighty pounds. He is the friendliest dog. He is the best behaved dog ever and he never wanders out into the street. He doesn't run after kids when they go by. Never leaves the property. And I just never thought about that. I thought he's just like the best behaved dog ever.

Well, one day Cash was sitting there on the lawn and I walked by. His owner was there and I said hello and I asked if I could pet Cash and she said: oh, yeah. He loves that. Walked over there and as I was petting him, I noticed he had a little electronic device on his collar and his owner explained that this was an e-collar, part of an invisible fence system. You probably have heard of it; maybe some of you have that at your property if you have a dog. If Cash wanders over to the line where the invisible fence is buried, he receives a sharp tone, it is inaudible to us, but he hears it and then it is an uncomfortable kind of jingling of the collar and this conditioning then trained him to never go beyond the invisible fence line. He doesn't even get that close to it because he doesn't want to hear that tone. And after a while they don't even need the fence, it is just conditioned in there.

Now, I heard about an experiment at a zoo and I can't believe people did this, but they did it. I'm not agreeing with it, but it was interesting. They put five chimpanzees in a cage and they hung a banana from a string. Now, when a chimp tried to get the banana, they soaked him with water and then the other four got soaked with water too. And this was repeated until the five chimps learned to just leave that banana alone. They put a new one there every day.

And then one chimp was taken out and another one was put in. Well, the new one tried to eat the banana. The other four attacked him for no reason that he understood and they attacked him because they didn't want to be hosed with the water. Well, then a second chimp was taken away and another new one was added and when he tried to eat the banana, the three original chimps, who knew why they weren't supposed to eat the banana, though they were no longer soaked, they had become conditioned, they began to attack, but then the fourth one who had come in, he attacked for no reason he understood. It was just that everybody attacked the chimp so he jumped right in. They all know that if a new chimpanzee comes into the cage they can't eat the banana.

Mental attitudes like this are reinforced and that's called conditioning, but these are conditioned in individuals and families and even in churches and it's hard for us to try new things because of a reinforced belief.

In our Epistle lesson that Joe read pretty well from Acts 11, we have encountered another kind of invisible fence. The early church is experiencing this amazing wave of growth. Now it is an ethnic church at this point. In the early church you were Israeli whether you were native born in the land of Israel or whether you were Israeli from outside, you were part of the Jewish fold. And there were many levels of invisible fencing that they were conditioned to observe. Those invisible fences were not unimportant. Their experience of Gentile contact was often negative. Anti-Semitism is one of the oldest forms of racism going all the way back to Pharaoh and as you and I know too well, it hasn't gone away even now. All they wanted to do was observe their faith, be left alone in peace. Mixing up in the world lead to things like trips of Babylon and slavery and prodigal sons and other disappointing experiences and the Jewish people have often had to bear the brunt of brutal programs and even Holocausts. So those fences were there for protection.

Now, in our text, Peter is on a spiritual retreat in the port city of Joppa. He is there in deep prayer and then a vision appears to him, the sheik comes out of heaven filled with all kinds of animals that no observant Jew would ever eat. They are not kosher. And a voice calls out: Peter, kill and eat. And this happens several time, a very powerful vision that is repulsive to Peter. I've never put anything like that in my mouth and I'm not going to! He blanched at the idea of crossing his invisible fence and God says: What I have called clean, don't call unclean.

God's sheet was there before Peter blotting out the boundary between Gentile and Jew, something God just knew it was time to get beyond. And the thought of crossing that boundary and being among people considered unclean to Peter was just repulsive. He was conditioned to reject such things with no exceptions except that this vision was from God and God was calling Peter to understand that God's incredible generosity is for all people, not just some. That God is calling the world to himself reconciling us by the cross of Christ, that the old animosities, the old prejudices, the old barriers of race and class and gender, orientation, they don't matter to God. God just sees people made in His image, but that matter to us.

This is the invisible fence which most committed Christians, myself included, don't realize we've crossed and it is the sin, this is the invisible fence for us, of serving God on our own terms and being happy about it. We do tend to create bless me clubs even while we are saying bless me to...maybe not them.

Now, the core of the matter is this: whose opinion is to be followed and on what basis do the people overrule the decrees of God, because we are called to follow in all things, not just some. Not just the ones we agree with, but the whole counsel of scripture is there for us and what God has called clean and who God has called clean, who are we to argue.

So, God is setting the same vision that He had given to Peter before you and me today. Now, as you follow the story, what made Peter get up from that vision and answer the knock on the door? It follows in the text later, you should read the text later if you get a chance. Three men were sent by Cornelius who had an angelic visitation earlier in the day that he would send for someone named Peter, whom he didn't know, in the city of Joppa and that he would explain what God wants him to know and so he did. A knock is at the door as soon as this vision is over for Peter. And here are three men. He realizes this is from God. What made him say: yes, I will go up to the city of Caesarea and I will do what God wants me to do.

Well, plenty of prophets from the history of scripture didn't go. What made Peter go? He went because he understood the love and the grace and forgiveness of Jesus deep in his own heart and maybe it was the memory of that night in the Upper Room when Jesus washed his feet, when he took the bread and the wine, when he said: A new commandment I give you that you love one another. By this we'll all know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.

Peter had this love in his heart. This was the love that forgave his betrayal of Jesus, his abandonment of Jesus. It was the love that reconciled him with Jesus that night and back in the Upper Room that Easter night when Jesus came and showed his wounds and he breathed peace to them and reconciled Peter. This was the love of Jesus that was moving him, the love that showed Peter the way. When Jesus says in the 14th chapter of John: I am the way, the truth and the life. This is the way and this is the truth, this is the life.

So, we serve a God who wants all of His children to feel love, not shamed, not punished, not chastised, not judged, not isolated, but loved. All God's children deserve this, no exceptions. We are not very good at that. I believe in the church, I want you to know that. Pastor Jeff and I have devoted our lives to building up the church. I believe that God wants to use the church and does use the church. But I'll be honest, the church can be a pretty tough place and everybody in this room understands that, we know that. Churches have a long history of sins and sinners. There is usually much more flesh in every church than there is spirit, so should we be surprised when we hear stories of how Christians judge, exclude, condemn, hate and should we be surprised when other say: why would I darken the sanctuary door?

Love one another, by this shall all people know that you are my disciples. The love of Christ and our love for Christ is the only thing that can change us and change the church. We all have our invisible fences; I have mine, you have yours. When God shows them to me, I am so deeply embarrassed, but I realized there is no power, no electricity in those fences, that I can cross those boundaries because they are only the ones in my head.

It is by our love for Christ that we grow beyond the conditioning in our minds that form those invisible fences and our love for one another is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. It is true the love for Christ that we will embody who Jesus is, make Jesus real, palpable, relatable, plausible to a dying world.

But here's the good news too: God is not done with the church. God is not giving up on the church. The church will be here. The church will stand the test of time because it is of God. God may be done with churches that don't do that, that will not live out the love of Christ, but God is not done with the church. But God doesn't have to bless us because we call ourself a church, however, God's Spirit will bless us as we are filled with the love of Christ and desire only to give that love away. Amen.