

**Walling Out, Walling In**  
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Mark 9:38-50

Maybe someone has asked you sometime or other, "Have you been born again?" That feels like a question to which there really isn't a correct response. It's always possible that the asker is genuinely concerned about your immortal soul, but usually it feels like they're trying to sound you out, to figure out whether you're worth bothering with. It's like they're some kind of religious bouncer at the door of the Jesus Club. "Are you a friend of Jesus? Then come on in! If you're not, better stay on the other side of the rope and read one of our pamphlets."

Human beings expend a lot of energy trying to figure out who's in and who's out, who's hot and who's not, who is safe to associate with and who might be a potential rapist or suicide bomber. Of course, it's sensible and prudent to protect ourselves from harm. If you've been to visit anyone in a hospital lately, you have seen signs near the front door advising you that if you have sniffles, sneezes, or anything remotely resembling flu symptoms, you should turn around and go straight back home. Some hospitals are equipping visitors with masks to protect patients against the H1N1 virus. Here at church we have stocked our classrooms with a supply of hand sanitizer and are advising our Church School teachers to be alert for symptoms of flu. We are trying to be safe and prudent.

That desire to be safe can cause us serious spiritual problems, though. Those problems keep coming up as Jesus encounters different people throughout Mark's gospel. Who is inside the realm of God and who is outside . . . and how do we tell the difference anyhow? Can we tell by the foods they eat, the prayers they say, the music they listen to, or how they wash their hands? Which people are beyond God's care and grace? As we have followed Jesus through these weeks, we have heard his pronouncement that no foods were unclean. We have seen him change his mind and decide that even foreigners, women, children, and people in nasty lines of work are included in God's realm.

Now the disciples are bent out of shape because somebody outside their circle has the temerity to perform healing in the name of Jesus. What nerve! They run back to Jesus to report the activities of this presumptuous fellow. "Master, we knew you'd want to know" they say. "You'll want to put a stop to this outrageous unauthorized healing!"

But to their amazement, Jesus doesn't agree with them. See, he doesn't care about his reputation; he cares about people. Because healing comes from God, it doesn't matter to Jesus whether it comes from his hands or someone else's. Just as with Eldad and Medad, divine grace can come through anyone. They don't have to have a degree from medical school or seminary or be a member of our church.

It challenges our ideas for Jesus to say "Whoever is not against us is for us" because that erases the line we like to draw around our comfort zone. It's not that protecting ourselves against swine flu or terrorists is a bad thing. But the boundary-making activity that enables us to protect ourselves from pathogens and to have healthy separateness in relationships can backfire. If we allow ourselves to be governed by our fears and personal preferences rather than by respect for one another, we end up building huge fences along international borders, barriers that damage the peacefulness of our planet and the sanctity of the human spirit.

We would do well to practice discernment by asking ourselves the question Robert Frost asks in "Mending Wall":

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out.

There's a short story by Nadine Gordimer called "Once Upon a Time." It is the tale of a white South African family living in an affluent suburb. Their life seems at first to be story-book perfect, as they live happily ever after in their comfortable home. All is not quite perfect, though, because outside their idyllic neighborhood, there are "others" who make them afraid. Beyond the bounds of their property are terrifying demonstrations and racially motivated violence, so the family starts to add security measures to

their home. They install a sophisticated alarm system. They put steel bars on the windows. They put electronic gates in the wall around their house and build the wall higher. Bit by bit their home becomes a fortress and they become prisoners inside it. Ultimately their fear leads them to install a coil of razor wire atop the wall around the house. Their adored young son becomes fascinated with the barbed wire, which he thinks looks like a dragon with sharp teeth. The story's chilling conclusion is that he imagines that he is protecting his family from the dragon, climbs into the deadly tunnel of spikes, and is killed.

The walls we build to exclude others in the name of protecting ourselves can destroy our own souls. Jesus' siding with the unwashed, the excluded, and the uncredentialed is hard going for anyone who wants to make a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders. Yet all of Jesus' teaching and all of his actions contain an invitation to refocus our gaze, to look at the person, not at the fence. Jesus looks over there at the undocumented exorcist and sees demons being cast out. Healing is taking place. And healing is a sure sign of God's presence.

As someone has put it, "Whenever you want to draw lines in order to mark who is outside the kingdom and who is inside, always remember: *Jesus is on the other side of the line!* Jesus is always with the outsiders!" (Richard A. Jensen, *Preaching Mark's gospel*. OH: Lima. CSS Publishing, 1996: 149).

There's a story that during the Second World War, in a village in Poland, there lived a man who was known for his compassion for others. He wasn't a wealthy man and he wasn't even a native of the village. It was a Catholic country, yet he did not attend the village church, nor had he ever been baptized. But in the village he had adopted as his home, he was known for his good works. If a stranger needed a place to stay, the man would offer a cot in his little home. If a family ran out of food, he was the first to offer a loaf of bread or some flour from his meager rations. If the Germans or later the Russians swept through the village to conscript the young men into military service, he would help hide them in the woods. On account of all his good works, he was greatly loved by the people in the village.

When the beloved man died, the villagers asked the priest to bury him. The priest knew and loved the man as much as the rest of the people did, but he could not agree to bury him in consecrated ground. He would conduct the funeral, but because the man was not baptized, he couldn't consent to bury him in the church cemetery. He said, "Those are the rules of the church, and I cannot change them."

The villagers protested that surely God loved this man as much as any baptized person, maybe even more because he did so much good. The priest agreed that the man was a good person, but he insisted that the rules of the church must be obeyed. Finally the priest came up with a compromise he hoped would satisfy everyone. He said, "I will bury him on church land, but it will have to be outside the fence that surrounds our cemetery."

So that's what they did. A grave was prepared just outside the wall, the villagers carried the man's body to the site, and the priest conducted the service. Then the grave was filled in, a stone placed over it, and everyone went home.

The next morning when the priest went to the church for mass, he saw that something had happened during the night. The wall around the cemetery had been moved. Now the enclosure around the cemetery included the grave of the man they loved so much.

We can exclude flu germs, evil thoughts, or intrusive actions all we want to. We can try to discriminate between people on the basis of religion, hygiene, education, what kind of passport somebody has, or the kind of shampoo they use. But Jesus showed us that people can't be fenced out and God's love can't be fenced in. God breaks out of all the boundaries we make for credentials and power and authority. In God's realm, no one is outside the fence.