

## **Setting the Right Limits**

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Lent 1A 2008 | Genesis 2-3; Matthew 6

One of the most challenging aspects of being a parent is knowing how to set the right limits.

**With discipline:** How much is right; how much is too much. To spank or not to spank. With two children, how to treat each one fairly while not necessarily treating them the same.

**With appropriate activities:** What can Abby, or now Amy, rightly do at age 5, compared to age 10, compared to age 13? And the always dreaded, "When can they start dating?" For me, the right limit on that would be 'never.' But I don't think either Abby or Amy would be too thrilled about that!

Sometimes, it's good to push against human limitations:

Orville and Wilber Wright and the first flight (1903)

Roger Bannister and the 4 minute mile (1954)

The most effective scientists, artists, athletes, inventors, teachers, politicians, pastors, bishops, congregational leaders all push against human limitations at one time or another.

Sometimes, though, pushing against limits, or boundaries, is simply an exercise in rebelliousness; in selfishness. Every healthy relationship, whether with God or with another person, requires healthy boundaries; healthy limits.

Our Lenten theme: 'for the healing/saving of the world' based on the angel's words to Joseph about Jesus' purpose:

*She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus,  
for he will save his people from their sins.*

Matt 1.21

This morning, the healing/salvation Jesus brings includes reestablishing the healthy divine limits/boundaries that were meant to be part of our relationship with God.

### **Divine limits established (Genesis 1-2):**

- An orderly creation; harmonious balance and interdependence.
- Humans placed in the garden 'to till and keep it.'
- They can eat from any tree except one; no sense of their being deprived.

### **Emergence of death/broken limits between God and humans**

- Genesis 3: serpent pushes against divine boundaries; he entices humans to eat from forbidden tree (3.1-7); humans have their relationship with each other and with God modified (3.15-19), and they are expelled from Eden (3.22-24).
- Genesis 6: humans break boundaries with God by becoming married to sons of gods/Nephilim. God sees the evil so rampant in the world, and causes flood to destroy people.
- Genesis 11: God sees how humans wish to puncture the boundaries with heaven by building a tower; fear that there will be nothing they won't be able to do, so God confuses people's language and scatter the humans across the earth.

Even the story of God's establishing the covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai – establishing some divine limits in the form of the 10 commandments (Ex 20) – is met by humans pushing at those boundaries (Ex 32), which resulted in a generation of wandering in the wilderness. God reestablishes the covenant with the people (Ex 34; Josh 24), and still they push against the limits (e.g., the prophet's repeated critiques of the people's lack of justice and faithfulness to Torah).

The story of scripture is the ongoing story of God establishing limits and boundaries and relationship with us, and our selfish human tendency to push those limits.

### **Battle/testing between Jesus and devil (Matthew).**

That testing of boundaries even plays itself out in this morning's gospel reading where the devil tempts Jesus to change the divine limits:

*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.* 4.3

Creating food when you're hungry isn't a bad thing. Neither is creating enough food for many people, which seems to be implied by the invitation to turn many stones into many loaves of bread (i.e., more than what Jesus would have needed personally). In fact, Jesus will later feed 5000 people after multiplying some loaves of bread and a few fish.

*Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down . . ."* 4.6

Throw self down from temple: make a powerful demonstration, Jesus, about your power. Again, not necessarily a bad thing. People appreciate signs from the leaders that they have appropriate authority and power. The sign that

Jesus will show the world concerning his power and authority, though, won't be from the heights of the temple. It will be from the heights of the cross. The sign won't be that the angels come and save him; it'll be that he willingly stays on the cross until the authorities lower him and Joseph of Arimathea places him in his tomb.

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and he said to Jesus, "All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me."*

4.8-9

All the world's authority from devil: Jesus' reply shows he knows who really holds the world's authority. Ironically, God gives Jesus 'all authority in heaven and on earth' (Matt 28.18)

None of Jesus' temptations were to do anything grossly evil, but to do good things for the wrong reasons or at the wrong time. The problem with all three temptations is that they come from a word other than God's. If Jesus does what the devil asks – even if they are very good things – Jesus is then living by a word that is not coming out of God's mouth.

This is how the devil tries to reset the boundaries between humans and God; to thwart God's desires for how this relationship might be restored. Jesus' response is to remain true to his identity as God's son, true to his purpose of saving us from our sins, and true to the most effective way to accomplish this salvation.

And for this we can only say, "Thanks be to God!"

Amen