

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 25, 2022

Broken Barriers

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

You ever get the feeling that something is odd, but you can't quite put your finger on it? In my first call in Northwood, ND we lived in a lovely parsonage sandwiched between the church I served and the only funeral home in town. Now, that's not the odd bit. Rather, not long after we moved in, I got that weird feeling about the downstairs bathroom. It was just off the kitchen and was rather small. I had this feeling there was something off about it, but never took the time to figure out what was bothering me about it.

We lived there for years and had no problems. Eventually our daughter is born. Well, if you ever need someone to find out if something is off or odd, use a toddler! I forget the exact circumstances, but I know I was home alone with a two-year-old Eva, who would like to be called "V" so that's how I'll be referring to her going forward. I must have turned my back for a second or two and she was gone. Luckily it didn't take me long to figure out where she was. I heard noises coming from the downstairs bathroom.

Here's where I discovered what was subconsciously bothering me about that bathroom. It had a lock, as most bathrooms do, but it was a keyed lock. Not your typical interior door lock that has the small hole in the handle on the outside. And, as you can probably guess, V had managed to lock herself in that bathroom. And no, of course we didn't have a key to that door. The master key didn't work, and none of the other various keys in the house worked either.

It took me several minutes to work my way through all those keys and in the meantime, V must have realized she was trapped. She started to get upset. I tried to keep her calm, but was having limited success. I even tried talking her through unlocking the door to let me in, but that didn't work either. At this point I had called Christina to let her know what was going on, but she didn't really have any ideas either. Please understand that Northwood is a small

town, the closest locksmith would have been in Grand Forks, a good 45 minutes away.

At this point some time has elapsed and V is getting more and more panicked. As she is getting upset, I am getting upset too. I couldn't stand to hear her so frightened. So, I ran to the garage and grabbed a hammer. Went to that bathroom door and tried to warn V that I was going to be loud, but that I would have her out soon. Two or three good whacks with the hammer and the doorknob pops right off. I reach into the mechanism and pull the bolt back and push on the door. Only to have the door stop after an inch.

You see, V had also managed to pull open the drawers of the vanity, one of which was an inch from the door and therefore blocking the door from opening. Well, an inch is enough to see through, so I could at least make eye contact with my daughter, but that didn't help much. We were so close to getting her out of that room, but barriers just keep coming up. Barriers that V herself had, albeit unintentionally, erected between me and her.

So here I am with a toddler bawling her eyes out, trying desperately to calm her down. All the while I've reached through that one-inch gap with my finger and am slowly, painstakingly closing the drawer a quarter inch or so at a time. After what seemed like an eternity, I got the drawer closed, the door opened all the way, and my crying daughter in my arms.

There are some problems with viewing God as a parent. Especially for those children who had to endure terrible or abusive parents. But I do understand that in many ways parental love is an appropriate analogy for God's love for humanity. At least the sort of parental love that had me doing everything in my power to rescue my daughter.

I don't share this story because I'm trying to say I'm the greatest dad ever, I'm definitely not! Feel free to ask my kids about my parenting failures, they'd be happy to share them with you, I'm sure! Rather, I share this story because it illustrates, I think, just a tiny sliver of the sort of love God has for humanity. The sort of love that will break every barrier down to be with us.

God's parental love is far deeper and more perfect than any sort of parental love we're able to show. It's the love of the one who spun every atom in the universe into existence and knows their number. The sort of love that formed and crafted you and knows every fiber of your being. The sort of love that

claims you always and forever, no matter what. This is the love that led to the Word becoming flesh and dwelling with us.

God saw the barriers humanity was erecting between us and God. God saw the many and various ways we have learned to avoid God, avoid connection with the very source of life. God saw all the ways in which we are living that do us harm. And out of a deep desire to ensure our freedom to make our own way in life, but also out of a desire to show us a better way to be, the life we were created for; God took on human flesh and form, human limitation, in order to come to our rescue.

God in Christ showed us what grace upon grace looks like. God in Christ showed us the Way we were created to walk, the life we were created to live. God in Christ taught us how to love better, more deeply and authentically. God in Christ tore down the barriers he encountered: systemic barriers like those of the Temple system,¹ barriers based on rules and traditions like those around Sabbath keeping,² racial and ethnic barriers like those between Samaritans and Israelites,³ ethical and political barriers like the disdain shown tax collectors,⁴ communal and health barriers like those that forced lepers into exile,⁵ barriers around power and class like those between the Romans and Israelites,⁶ and even barriers of fear, anxiety and death.⁷

God seems to be in the business of breaking down barrier. Barriers far more difficult to overcome than a bathroom door. God is clearly not a fan of things that get in the way of relationships. And not just our relationship with God, but also our relationships with one another. God created us for life in connection and community. In our obstinate brokenness we throw up barrier after barrier between us and God and between us and one another. And God, graciously, lovingly, stubbornly, works to tear those barriers down.

What barriers is God working to overcome in your life? In what way is God desperately trying to get through to you with love, grace, and mercy? And how might we be barrier breakers instead of barrier makers? How might we pursue the life we were created to live? A life of deep connection and community. A life with no barriers between us and God or between us and

¹ John 2:13-17 (All Scriptures quoted from the NRSVUE)

² Mark 2:23-28

³ John 4:7-30, 39-42

⁴ Luke 5:27-28

⁵ Luke 17:11-19

⁶ Matthew 8:5-13

⁷ Matthew 27:45-54

one another. This Christmas I pray that God break down any barriers in your life. I pray that you experience what its like to have someone love you so much nothing will stop them from getting to you. That's what God is up to. That's what God is doing right now...getting a hammer in order to get to you. Amen.