

July 3, 2022
Erasing the Lines
Isaiah 56:1-8
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A few weeks ago, at Pub Theology, we had a conversation about building walls, not necessarily the brick-by-brick kind. We talked about how some walls, whether physical or metaphorical, are made to keep people safe, and others are made to keep people out and sometimes the walls we say are for safety really are not. I would like to begin this morning by recreating a little bit of that conversation by asking you to name situations where there walls keep people out.

I will go first: social or professional clubs that cost a lot of money to join. The fees act as a wall to keep people without money out.

Now it's your turn.

(Allow time for responses)

We build a lot of walls, don't we? Without even thinking about it, we do all kinds of things that creates walls between us and people from whom we think we should be separated. Today's highlighted movie, *Westside Story*, is full of walls-walls of old buildings torn down to make room for gentrification, walls between people with white skin and people with brown skin, walls between law enforcement and young people...a lot of walls. I hope you took time this week to see *Westside Story*. Maybe if you didn't, you recall seeing it years ago when it was introduced in the 1960s.

Just in case you haven't seen it or don't remember much about it, let me bring you up to speed. *Westside Story* is similar to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It's a story of intense love amid a backdrop of division and hate. In *Romeo and Juliet*, there were two feuding families, the Capulets and the Montagues. In *Westside Story* the tension is between the Sharks, a Puerto Rican gang, and the Jets, a gang made up of "American" (hear "white") boys. Both gangs are vying for control of the streets of west Manhattan in New York.

The movie opens as an incident between the Jets and Sharks leader, Bernardo, escalates into an all-out fight between the two gangs. Law enforcement, who clearly know both gangs and their members, arrives to break up the fight.

Both the Jets and the Sharks operate under the assumption that anyone who is not like them is “the other,” not to be trusted, to be kept outside and away, and controlled, even if that means using violence.

In a conversation within the Jets gang, after the fight, the leader of the Jets, Riff, says succinctly, “they ain’t us.” Against this backdrop of animosity and fear of the other, Tony, one of the founders of the Jets, had been recently released from prison. His time in prison helped him see that the violence of the streets was not what he wanted for his life. He had a job and was committed to a new way of being. Unfortunately, Riff would not take no for an answer and dragged him back into the tension between the Jets and the Sharks. While at a dance, where both gangs were present, Tony met and fell in love with Maria, Bernardo’s sister. You can imagine, Bernardo didn’t want a Jet anywhere near his sister. For Maria and Tony, though, the solid line of “us versus them” begins to blur. And the couple dream of peace between the Jets and the Sharks and a life together.

In today’s text from Isaiah, the line between the Israelites and groups that had always been “the other,” is not just blurred, it is erased, at least from God’s perspective. We know, though, that God’s people continue to struggle with all kinds of lines.

This is Isaiah 56:1-8.

Thus says the Lord:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come
and my deliverance be revealed.

²Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil.

³Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
“The Lord will surely separate me from his people,”
and do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”

⁴For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

⁵I will give, in my house and within my walls,

a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

⁶And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it
and hold fast my covenant—

⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar,
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

⁸Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel:
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

These verses radically expand the boundaries for being included among God's people. The author writes into a context of disagreement about how the post-exilic Jewish community should define itself, in other words, they were trying to figure out who was in and who was out. This text invites us to consider the lines we draw and walls we build around our own communities.

As the Judean exiles began returning to Jerusalem in the late fifth century BCE, the boundaries of the worshipping community had to be renegotiated in light of their new reality. While the people had been exiled, Israelites had married people who had been "the other." The people returning from exile were not even the same people who had originally been exiled. 70 years had passed while the people were scattered. These were the children and grandchildren of the ones who had initially been exiled. These new generations were coming back to Jerusalem and the focus was on rebuilding the worshipping community.

This passage looks forward to a rebuilt temple that shall be called, "...a house of prayer for all peoples." The voice heard here in Isaiah is different than other voices of the time which argued for defining the community narrowly among

ethnic lines (see Ezra 9:1-3; Nehemiah 13:1-3, 23-27; Ezekiel 44:6-7). Our text today offers a more expansive vision of who God's people would be. Here, the author mentions specifically that foreigners and eunuchs shall be welcomed into the assembly of the Lord. This call to inclusion is in stark contrast to Deuteronomy 23:1-8 which is essentially a list of who cannot be part of the faith community...eunuchs and foreigners are among them. This prophetic contradiction to the Torah would have been quite startling to the faithful ones who were trying to decide who was in and who was out.

It may be helpful to note, that when the passage from Deuteronomy came to be, church and state were inseparable, so anyone the king didn't want meddling in politics was also not allowed in the temple. That should help us understand why foreigners were excluded. This was all happening after the collapse of Assyrian imperial rule in the region, so the Israelites were very suspicious of anyone who might have been colluding with the Assyrians.

The exclusion of eunuchs, though, was two-fold. First, there was a belief that physical deformity (in this case, castration) made one impure. In addition, there was a political reason for exclusion. High ranking Assyrian officials, unlike Judean officials, were often eunuchs. These officials who oversaw the money or parts of the Assyrian territory had the potential to, and usually did, acquire quite a lot of power, making them potential threats to the king. To be king though, a person had to be able to produce an heir to the throne. Eunuchs were unable to do that, so they were perfect for these powerful jobs as they were no threat to the king. So, in Deuteronomy, eunuchs (because of the likelihood they were part of the Assyrian imperial system), were forbidden from temple participation to avoid influence from these outsiders who had previously been a threat to Israel.

Isaiah's inclusion of these groups wasn't just a token nod to diversity. The text envisioned full and robust participation in the worshiping community. Not only would eunuchs be allowed in the temple, but there would be permanent memorials there to compensate for their lack of descendants to carry on their names, "I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (Isaiah 56:5). And God wasn't going to wait for foreigners to find their way to the temple (the "if you build it, they will come" approach). Rather, God would bring them to God's holy mountain.

In the final verse of the passage, God promises to continue bringing people into community. Historically, this reflects the reality that exiled Judeans returned in waves over multiple centuries, so there was a consistent stream of new people coming into community. Theologically, it reflects the persistent trajectory across scripture to erase lines and expand the boundaries of God's people. This trajectory continued centuries later when Jesus came along. He demonstrated this through a willingness to heal on the sabbath, eat with tax collectors, welcome Samaritans, and his stories of God's pursuing love for all people. This was all a jolt to the ears and hearts of devout Jewish people and cause for concern in the minds of the Roman Empire. People with power really, really like walls and lines.

And this trajectory must continue today with us.

We must be people who do the work of erasing the lines and walls that divide people and keep us from one another. From a faith community perspective, we must be a place of welcome for all people, always working on our "Welcome" core value. But beyond this congregation and this building, our work is that of making space for all people in our community, our state, and this nation: a nation that was founded on high ideals but formed by people who were quite fond of lines and walls. They bought and sold and held captive human beings. They stole land and killed indigenous people. They limited who could vote. As years have gone by, lines have been erased, but it seems like in their place new lines have been drawn and some lines seem bolder than ever. And often those lines have been drawn and upheld by people who consider themselves Christians. They draw them in the name of protecting and preserving life, though, we get this wrong and end up protecting and preserving some lives over others, even though we know in our hearts every living, breathing human matters to God equally.

Westside story reminds us that drawing lines and "othering" people is dangerous. People die. I don't love this story. I like a story where everyone lives happily ever after. This week, I tried to imagine a new ending for the movie. I wanted Tony and Maria's love to change the Jets and the Sharks, to spark a new spirit in the neighborhood. I wanted love to win. It didn't though. Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks killed Riff, the leader of the Jets. Tony, overcome with emotion, killed Bernardo. The violence doesn't even end there though. The movie ends with Chino, a member of the Sharks, shooting Tony. Tony dies in Maria's arms, surrounded by the remaining members of the Jets and the Sharks. She expresses

her sadness and anger, blaming everyone for Tony's death and threatening to kill herself. Ultimately, she collapses in tears as the police arrive and members of both gangs carry Tony's body away.

I was left wondering, could this tragedy yield a new beginning? Could it usher in a new season where the remnants of the gangs, their leaders gone, make the decision to let the violence end there? Sometimes that happens. It is the reason Christians celebrate Easter. From Jesus' unnecessary, violent death, the story of resurrection brings hope and new life. We are supposed to be Easter people. We are supposed to bring that hope and that new life to our neighbors. Westside Story reminded me this week that our hope is in erasing the lines that divide us. Those lines seem really fixed right now. But just as Tony and Maria saw the lines blur as they fell in love, the lines we stand behind will blur in the light of God's love when we share it. We can love people, even though we disagree with them. We can love people even as we tell them we will not tolerate the dehumanization of our neighbors and ourselves. It's hard, but love is the only way forward.

I was visiting with a friend this week and she mentioned that she hated the ending of West Side Story and wished it had a happy ending like Romeo and Juliet. Another friend and I were like, "What happy ending? They died." She said, "Yes, but they both died. One wasn't left to grieve a horrible loss." And then she reminded us of the end of the play.

The Prince, with Romeo's letter in his hand says:
*Where be these enemies?—Capulet, Montague,
See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love,
And I, for winking at your discords too,
Have lost a brace of kinsmen.
All are punished.*

Capulet says:
*O brother Montague, give me thy hand.
This is my daughter's jointure, for no more
Can I demand.*

Montague replies:

*But I can give thee more,
For I will ray her statue in pure gold,
That whiles Verona by that name is known,
There shall no figure at such rate be set
As that of true and faithful Juliet.*

Capulet responds:

*As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,
Poor sacrifices of our enmity.*

And the play ends finally with the Prince:
*A glooming peace this morning with it brings.
The sun for sorrow will not show his head.
Go hence to have more talk of these sad things.
Some shall be pardoned, and some punished.
For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.*

In the end, the Prince, Montague, and Capulet acknowledge that division and hatred had, indeed, punished them all. And the same is true for us, our hate and division punishes all of us. Today, amid this weekend in which we are supposed to celebrate our unity and freedom, let us commit to being line erasers and lovers of people, let us use our freedom to make a place for all people, a place that is free and safe and just, a place very different from today's United States of America. Amen.