

Today is Rogation Sunday. I'm sure that you all knew that before you walked through the doors this morning. Today begins a series of three days that always precede Ascension Day which falls 40 days after Easter. Rogation Days began in France in the fifth century and were associated with the blessing of the fields at planting. The priest would gather the members of his parish and process through the fields to bless them before the seeds were put into the ground.

The name Rogation comes from the Latin word 'rogatio,' to intercede, ask or beseech. Hence the people asked for God's blessings on their crops and their animals seeking a bountiful harvest. The practice had originated in an ancient Roman festival called the 'robigalia' when people went through their fields and prayed to the gods to protect their crops.

Now do not be afraid. We are not going to leave here after communion to march around our property with incense singing hymns and sprinkling holy water all over our jousting field. Maybe next year.

There are two things that I think we can glean from this ancient rogation tradition. One of those is to remember our connection with God's creation and to realize just how blessed we are with an abundance of beauty. From the sands of California to the waters of the Chesapeake, God has given us great responsibility to care for the earth. Surely we take for granted those who plant the crops that provide our daily bread and the underpaid laborers who reap the harvest that provides the sustenance we require to do the work God has called us to do. How easily we forget that this is our father's world, and without God's graceful abundance, we would be but dust.

However let me be clear that this is not just an Earth Day sermon, because there is another reason we should remember Rogation Sunday. There is another part of the ancient tradition. In those days as the priest led the congregation to bless the fields, they also **marked the boundaries** of the parish. By the 17th century, the old Roman festival of "Terminalia", or "boundaries", had been adapted by the church and served a practical purpose. In days before Ordinance Survey maps, there were not always clear lines of demarcation between the parishes, especially where there were open fields.

Get this, during the procession, boys were bumped on prominent marks and boundary stones, or rolled in briars and ditches, or thrown in the pond to ensure they never forgot the boundaries. Thank goodness the Victorians made it more civilized by beating objects rather than people, in the context of a service and procession. Along the way prominent trees often became places for preaching. They were sometimes known as Gospel Oaks or Gospel Thorns. Other landmarks along the boundaries were noted as places for prayer or bible reading. Hence the name 'Amen Corner' came into being.

Thinking about the boundaries of St. Margaret's Parish is an interesting concept. We are blessed with the beauty of this Broadneck Peninsula. We are reminded of the responsibility we have to care for those within our boundaries, to baptize the babies that are carried through our doors and to bless those members of our community as they are carried forth on their final eternal journey. To feed the poor who come to our doors and to support our neighbors through the difficult challenges of their

lives. Surely this is the commandment to which Jesus refers in our gospel lesson this morning. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" and "Love one another, just as I have loved you."

Reminding ourselves of the boundaries of our community makes us feel safe. After all, we build fences for security. But whether they are geographic or social or spiritual, boundaries remind us of our identity and they remind us who we are and whose we are.

In the 1630s the great poet George Herbert, that epitome of English country parsons, said that this practice of beating the bounds should be encouraged for four reasons:

1. To seek God's blessing on the fields.
2. To establish justice in the preservation of bounds.
3. To promote charity in loving, walking and neighborly accompanying one another while reconciling their differences.
4. To enable mercy, in relieving the poor by giving liberally to those in need.

This is the turning point in my sermon this morning. Yes boundaries are important. Yes they keep us safe and secure, and they are necessary to keep order in our society. Boundaries in the workplace and in our families are necessary for reasons I need not explain. But I came across a story the other day that moved me so much that I want to share it with you now.

The story takes place in Poland during the Second World War. In this particular village there was a man who was well known for his care and compassion for others and who was deeply respected by this community. He was not a particularly wealthy man, nor was he a native of the village, nor did he even attend the village church. In fact he was not even baptized, and he showed little interest in wanting to be. But both before and during the War he was known for his good works within the village that he had adopted as his home. If a stranger came to the village and needed a place to stay, this man would offer a cot in his little home. If a village family ran out of food, he was among the first to offer a loaf of bread or some flour from his meager supplies. If the Germans or, later the Russians, were performing a sweep of the village to collect up the young men for imprisonment, or to force them into the army, or worse, he would help hide the would be victims in the woods outside of town. The villagers loved him very much because of who he was and what he did with his life.

Eventually the man died from some cause or other - what it was the story doesn't say. The villagers prepared his body for burial and proceeded to the village church where they asked the priest to perform the burial service and to bury the man in the church cemetery. The priest, who knew and loved the man as much as the rest of the villagers agreed that he would conduct the funeral service - but he insisted, despite many pleas from the villagers, that he could not bury the man inside the church cemetery because he was not baptized. "The cemetery is hallowed ground," the priest said. "He must go where those who are not baptized are buried. Those are the rules of the church, and I cannot change them."

The villagers appealed even more earnestly to the priest, saying that the man was a good man and surely loved by God as much as any of the baptized, perhaps even more on account of all the good that he had done. The priest agreed with them regarding the virtues of the man, but insisted that the rules of the faith were clear and could not be broken.

Finally the priest came up with a compromise that he hoped would satisfy everyone. "In recognition of your love for him - and his love for you and all of God's people in this village, I will bury

him on church land, near to those who have gone before him - those whom he has loved, but it will have to be beyond the fence that surrounds the consecrated ground of our cemetery." And so on the appointed day a grave was prepared just outside the fence that surrounded the church cemetery, and the body of the man was processed by all the villagers to the site where the priest conducted the ceremony. Then the grave was filled in and a stone placed before the night fell. But during the night something very beautiful happened - something that became apparent when the priest went to the church the next morning to conduct the morning mass. The fence that surrounded the cemetery **had been moved** by some of the villagers so that it now **included** the grave in which the man had been buried.

Now I'm not about to argue whether or not baptism is necessary for our salvation, but I do think this story captures something of what the gospel of Jesus is all about – breaking down every barrier so that all may know that Jesus abides in us and we in him. As the villagers expanded the fence which enclosed hallowed ground to include the grave of the man whom they loved - so God, through Christ Jesus, expands the boundaries of the church to include both those whom the rules of our religion would exclude - and those that the ways of this world would exclude.

"Quite honestly, this is the moment when the Gospel of Jesus Christ begins to terrify me. I am fine when Jesus and I are all alone, when we are an intimate church of two. We have our own private conversations. Jesus nurtures and heals me. When I am down, I turn to Jesus for help and guidance. When I am joyful, I give him thanks. When I am scared, I ask him to calm my storms. I come to the altar week by week, and Jesus feeds me with his own body and with his own blood, shed for me. And I give him my love, my service, my all. And this relationship works for me, quite well.

"But then, just as in the lives of the disciples, there is a moment in our lives when something about our relationship with Jesus changes....when Jesus calls us beyond the boundary of what is simply good and comfortable and nurturing. There is a moment when Jesus asks us to love him by loving others. Perhaps that moment is when we encounter such profound poverty or injustice, we can no longer keep quiet. Perhaps that moment is when we realize a truth about ourselves. Perhaps that moment is when we decide our children must live in a better world tomorrow than the world we are living in today. Perhaps that moment is when our childhood relationship with God feels as outgrown or outdated as a trusted security blanket that has served past its time. (Pause.) Perhaps that moment is right now. And in this moment, Jesus is moving our relationship to a deeper place, inviting us to love him and to be in love with him in a new way."ⁱ

Today we give thanks for our community, for our friends and neighbors and the safety and comfort of our surroundings. We give thanks for this great world of ours and ask God to continue to bless us with its resources. But we must also think outside of the box this morning and ready ourselves to seek charity, justice and mercy for all the peoples of every nation and refuse to accept the status quo because that's the way it's always been. It is not easy, but he has given us an Advocate, to be with us forever. The Holy Spirit will come and empower us to demolish boundaries and strengthen us to love others, particularly those whom no one else will love. And finally, together, as we love, Jesus will be in you and me, and we will be in him.

ⁱ From my friend and seminary classmate The Reverend Canon Grey Lesesne, Christ Church Cathedral, Indianapolis, Indiana.