

“Where Do We Draw the Line?”

Mark 1:1-8

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Westminster, Greenville

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A number of years ago, my wife brought home the bulletin from church after worship was done.

This was before we moved to Greenville, when our children were much younger.

It was the bulletin she had used during worship that day.  
It was ALSO the bulletin that our younger son had used to keep himself occupied during the sermon that day.

I say “Keep himself occupied...”

What was on the bulletin were a bunch of lines and letters.  
It was a game of hangman.  
My wife helped our son stay occupied during the sermon by playing a game of hangman with him.

Well, nothing wrong with that.

I used to doodle and draw on the bulletin when I was a child...so I looked at what my son had spelled out in the hangman game.

Three words.  
Six letters in the first.  
Two in second.  
Six in the third word.

Do you know what the hangman phrase was that my wife had to guess during my sermon?

“Church is boring”...

I can't remember if my wife guessed it—I think she did—  
I think she won that game...

Why do I share that with you?

I'd like to invite you this morning to consider the experience of drawing lines.

Not for a game of hangman.  
Not doodling on your Harbinger in worship.

I mean what it's like to draw a line—  
in your head, in your heart, in your life.

On the one hand, drawing lines can be a very helpful thing.

Lines can create appropriate boundaries.

Boundaries that allow one person to treat another person with dignity and respect.

Boundaries that help other people know that they are safe and valued and loved.

Going into the YMCA these days, there's a line that takes you in one door...and if you're leaving, a line that directs you out the other door. Why do they do this? Because, in the midst of a pandemic, they are trying to keep their members as safe as possible.

Lines can be good things...

Sometimes, drawing a line is a necessary thing.  
A way of determining right from wrong, good from evil.

At the beginning of Isabell Wilkerson’s new book, “Caste,”  
Wilkerson describes a famous photograph:

“There is a...black-and-white photograph from the era of the Third Reich. It is a picture taken in Hamburg, Germany, in 1936, of shipyard workers, a hundred or more, facing the same direction in the light of the sun. They are heiling in unison, their right arms rigid in outstretched allegiance to the Fuhrer.

“If you look closely, you can see a man in the upper right who is different from the others. His face is gentle but unyielding...He is surrounded by fellow citizens caught under the spell of the Nazis. He keeps his arms folded to his chest, as the stiff palms of others hover just inches from him.

“He alone is refusing to salute. He is the one man standing against the tide.

“Looking back from our vantage point, he is the only person in the entire scene who is on the right side of history.”<sup>1</sup>

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Do you see what I mean, when I talk about drawing lines?

Sometimes, drawing a line is a very COURAGEOUS thing...  
And sometimes—well, sometimes it can become a very  
complicated thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, “Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents,” New York: Random House, 2020.

I'd like to invite you to consider the experience of drawing lines, because it happens so much in society today.

Society loves to take lines, and make a BOX out of them, right?  
And then we label that box.  
And then we put people in that box.

Sometimes there's truth in that box.  
And sometimes that box is just a way of keeping us from truly getting to know the people whom we've put there...

Have you ever done that?  
Have you ever put someone in a box before?

And in the process of doing so, you let yourself think that you really had a clear view of that person, when all your lines were doing was narrowing your view of that person?

I'm reminded of a story that the theologian Stanley Hauerwas tells about his father.

Hauerwas grew up in Texas, and his father was a frontiersman. His dad herded cows, lived a rugged and outdoors life.

As Hauerwas puts it, "Living with a gun was...as natural to [my father] as living with an automobile is for me."

So his dad expressed his love in the way of the frontier:  
not with OUTWARD signs of affection,  
but by ensuring his family's survival,  
giving them opportunities that he had never had.

This meant his son, Stanley, got to go to college, where he studied philosophy and theology and entered a world that was very different than his father's.

Then Hauerwas went to divinity school. Not to become a pastor, but to study some more. And the gap between his world and his dad's world continued to widen.

Whenever Stanley Hauerwas called home, his father would talk about a gun that he was making:

“...everything from boring the barrel and setting the sight, to hand-carving the stock. I thought that was fine, since it certainly had nothing to do with me.”

One summer, Hauerwas made his customary trip home. No sooner was he through the front door than his father thrust the completed rifle into his son's hands, giving it to him as a gift.

“It was indeed a beautiful piece of craftsmanship,” Hauerwas writes.

“And I immediately allowed as such, but I was not content to stop there...I said [to my dad], ‘Of course you realize that it will not be long before [our] society [is] going to have to take all these things away from you people.’”

At the time, Stanley Hauerwas thought he was saying what needed to be said.

Only later did Hauerwas realize that it was—in his words—  
“one of the lowest points of my ‘moral development.’”

“For what my father was saying, of course...[was how much he cared about me]. But all I could see was a gun...”<sup>2</sup>

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I’m asking you to consider today what it’s like to draw a line.

The courageous nature of it. The complicated nature of it.

And you may be saying to yourself, that’s all fine and good, but you’re wondering at this point if I’ve completely forgotten about our text.

Not to worry...let’s get to our text.

I’ve asked you to consider the experience of drawing lines, because that’s what John the Baptist did.

John the Baptist was drawing lines.

Mark writes:

“John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

This was no prosperity gospel preacher.

John was a fire and brimstone kind of preacher.

Do you remember what Matthew says about him?

Matthew writes:

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic,” Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1981. I first learned of this story in “The Senses of Preaching,” by Thomas G. Long, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

“...when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’”

John the Baptist was drawing lines.  
Lines of judgment about the way we ought to live.  
Lines to clarify the ways we need to love.

And so, on the one hand, today’s text is an invitation to all of us to consider the lines that we draw in our own life.

- Are there ways in which we’ve boxed people in, and we need to take apart that box, to rearrange those lines?
- Are there ways in which we could do more to stand against the evils of our own day—the racism in our society, the poverty that’s here in Greenville—are there ways in which we need to draw sharper lines with how we work for peace and justice?

John asks us to consider those questions today.  
But I also think John asks us to consider a third question.

**You see, what’s fascinating is where John the Baptist placed his lines.**

Mark tells us “...people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”

In other words, all kinds of people came to John.  
Roman soldiers. Tax collectors.  
Teachers. Carpenters. Even Jesus came to John.

John was not drawing lines between this person and that person.

John did not create a box with his lines, making a tidy little category for the Pharisees called BAD GUYS...

No, no...

John believed that the judgment of God was for everyone.

He believed that repenting was necessary for everyone.

Because at a deeper level, John believed the grace of God was for everyone.

He never turned anyone away from the baptism that he was offering.

It didn't matter if it was a Roman soldier who came to John for baptism, or a faithful Jewish peasant, or a Tea Party person or a Black Lives Matter person, or a Pharisee, or a lifelong Presbyterian.

John kept offering God's grace—

the chance to start over, the chance to begin again—

for anyone who came to him.

And I bet that somewhere in that large crowd of people, waiting to be baptized, someone was looking at all those different people, and in their mind—somebody in that crowd was drawing a line.

Thinking to themselves...really?

That person?

No...surely John won't baptize a Roman soldier...John wouldn't baptize a tax collector...

That would be too much grace.

John has a reputation for being a preacher of judgment.

But what John was offering people was nothing less than the grace of God.



A river of grace, that's what the Jordan was.  
A chance to start over.  
A chance to begin again.  
And John was offering that...for ANYONE.

Do you think John was offering too much grace?

It's a very popular line that gets drawn by some people in the Bible.

The line of TOO MUCH GRACE.

Plenty of examples in Scripture of people who draw that line.

Parable of the prodigal, right?  
Prodigal comes home, his father throws a party.  
And what does the elder son do?

He gets furious.  
His father is showing his delinquent younger brother...too much grace.

Do you know about this line?  
The line of too much grace?  
It's all over the Bible.

How about when Jonah goes to Nineveh and tells them to repent of their wickedness. What do the Ninevites do?

They repent.  
Even their animals repent.  
And how does God respond?

God decides to spare the city.  
And how does Jonah respond?

He gets angry at God!

Jonah says to God: “That is why I fled to Tarshish...for I knew that you are a gracious God...abounding in steadfast love...”

In other words, Jonah drew a line!  
He said—God, that’s too much grace!

What do you think would happen if you and I spent the rest of this Advent exploring where we’ve drawn lines around God’s grace—a time to consider whether we have any lines that God would like us to rearrange...

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I recall hearing a preacher once tell a story...and I couldn’t tell whether or not it was true.

The story was about a certain church in which the young people wanted someone in the congregation to play Santa Claus at their Christmas party. Christmas was coming, and they were looking for someone to be Santa.

They went to someone who happened to be a banker,  
very conservative with his money,  
but also very faithful in the church.

They went to him and said, “Will you be Santa Claus at our Christmas party?”

And in a moment of weakness, he said, “I suppose.”

Now they didn't ask him because he was generous or because he had the internal qualities of Santa.

They asked him because he had the EXTERNAL qualities of Santa.

He had the right SHAPE, if you will.

The kids looked at him and thought he'd make a good Santa.

As the time approached he got nervous; he started growling at supper every night.

He said to his wife, "I can't do this; I can't be Santa Claus."

"Sure you can, dear; just put on that silly suit and have some fun.

It's no big deal."

Well, the night of the party arrived.

This guy was so nervous he could hardly get in the suit.

"God, help me to be a good Santa Claus," he mumbled, but his wife heard him mumble it.

And she said, "Dear, you're taking the fun out of it. Relax."

So he went to the church.

And he played Santa. I mean, he REALLY got into it.

They were having a fund raiser at that party, a fund raiser for the different mission ministries of the church.

And he started writing checks. To this mission, to that mission.

By the end of the party he had given away half of his retirement savings.

He wasn't doing the math. He was just being Santa.

And he came home, and he told his wife.

“But how could you?” she asked him. “That was OUR money. That was OUR retirement. Nobody expected you to *be* Santa Claus!”<sup>3</sup>

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Now was that too much grace?

Like I said, I don't if that story is true.  
Here's what I do know.

Sometime between now and Christmas, you and I might find ourselves in a situation where have to make a decision.

A decision about what to say. A decision about what to do.

A decision about how much grace to offer to a stranger, or a friend, or a member of your family...

Where will we draw the line?

In the midst of a worldwide pandemic—  
when it comes to being gentle with other people...  
when it comes to simply being generous with every person  
you encounter...

is there such a thing as too much grace?

(Amen.)

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<sup>3</sup> This story appears in a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Fred B. Craddock, “Wanting but Not Wanting the Blessing,” in “The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock,” Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.