

# Defining Neighbor

November 5, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006

Gates Presbyterian Church

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Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Mark 12:28-34

[During the “Time With Our Younger Disciples,” the children were shown a crystal globe of the world devoid of any national boundary lines. Using a dry erase black marker, one child put a dot on the globe where Rochester is located, and pointed to where I then drew lines between Mexico and the United States and between Canada and the United States both above the forty-eight states and to between Alaska and the Yukon. I spoke of our “neighbors to the north,” and how they are much like us. I then drew tiny little lines in the Middle East, making a mess of that part of the globe – and spoke of how some people draw lines, build walls and fences and don’t think of people on the other side of lines as neighbors – but as enemies – and how Ruth, a Moabite, teaches us to look beyond the lines people make and (wiping the globe clean with a cloth) how God wants us to look at everyone as God’s people.]

Over four decade ago, when I was the age our younger disciples are now, images from space were fascinating but certainly not as detailed and as clear as those of today. In “my day,” the Great Wall of China was one of the very few human creations viewable from spacecraft. How that technology has changed! At [maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com) one can view the world as seen from satellites in space and zoom in to most parts of the globe with amazingly great detail.

This past week, I went to google maps and zoomed in on a favorite stop for tourists in Germany, the medieval walled city of Rothenburg ob der Tauber, as, on the Tauber River. The city’s quaint shops, narrow streets, large open town square and wonderfully preserved city walls and gates make for a wonderful day to spend in that part of Germany. “That part of Germany, ....” that is a tricky phrase, because a quick look at a contemporary map of Germany shows that Rothenburg is in the State of Bavaria, but to suggest to someone in Rothenburg that you were in Bayern, Bavaria would not be received very well.

Rothenburg is in a part of Germany once known as Franconia that was absorbed by the larger state to the south, Bavaria. People of Rothenburg speak an entirely different dialect of German than do Bavarians and their primary allegiance is to people of their ilk – the people of Mittel-Franken. For the people of Rothenburg, Ansbach is their county seat. (In German, rather than add adjectives, a noun simply gets longer and longer. The word for a county government capital city is *Regierungsbezirkshauptstadt* – one word with twenty-seven letters!) For the people of Rothenburg to look beyond Ansbach entails the State Capital in Munich and for many that might as well be a foreign city and the nation’s capital, Berlin, isn’t part of their daily vocabulary. A person from Rothenburg is a Franken, yes, a German, but not a Bavarian.

In 1841, when August Henrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben’s words “Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles” were set to Franz Joseph Haydn’s Austrian anthem, the intent was not to suggest that Germany was greater than any other country. Instead, to sing “Germany above all else,” suggested that loyalty to a nation should come before allegiance to one of the more than forty separate states that at that time had their own princes, kings, governments, borders (sometimes with walls) and identities. For the people of Franconia, like the residents of Rothenburg, this

was a revolutionary idea. To think of themselves as something other than Franconians was new. Indeed, for many, to think outside the walls of their city that defined their lives was novel.

Now, for the record, one of the derivatives from “Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles” was that when the German nation went to war, a soldier from Prussia in the north, from Stuttgart in the southwest, from Frankfurt am Main in the center and from Köln in the Rhineland would see themselves as Germans instead of peoples who would otherwise been just as likely to take up arms against each other! The acts of those who led the Third Reich, the Nazi Regime, stained the words of the first stanza of this anthem. Today’s German national anthem comprises only the third stanza of the original hymn. And Haydn’s glorious melody is still the music a great hymns, our final one for this morning, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken.”

Be it the Great Wall of China, the much smaller walls that surrounded cities of Europe during the Middle Ages or the barriers many nations erect today, one purpose, not particularly neighborly, is to keep the unwanted out. In more recent history, in the case of the Warsaw ghetto during World War II, the Berlin Wall and “Iron Curtain” during the Cold War and the barriers that today surround North Korea, walls are intended to keep people *in*, to prevent their leaving. This is not a debate over immigration policy or the effectiveness of a 700 mile barrier between part of the border between Mexico and the United States. Instead, I challenge us to look at the barriers we construct in our lives, walls that stand in the way of perceiving others as neighbors.

In Holy Scripture, there are many challenges to how we define neighbor. That Ruth was able to look beyond the definitions of Moabite and Jew, that she could see her devotion to her mother-in-law as superseding their ethnic differences, was revolutionary and novel. Ruth’s world-view was so at odds with theories of “ethnic purity” that her role in Jewish history was considered essential. The story of Ruth is no tangent, no “little biography” for the sake of interest. One of the reasons the Book of Ruth is in the Bible is *because it takes to task anyone who wants to narrowly define their “kind.”* Jews of Jesus’ day, like so many persons of the world then and now, were so determined to see themselves as special if not better than everyone else, that they contrived, I repeat, *contrived* the idea that there was such a thing as ethnic purity. Oh, we think that was a Nazi “thing,” to embrace an idea of Teutonic, Aryan purity – and, as a byproduct, superiority – but many Jews of Jesus’ day were just as guilty of that phenomenon. Who Ruth was and that for which she stands, contradicts and negates the whole theory. How could any Jew argue that to be part of the House of David, that great King, meant having nothing but 100% Jewish blood, when David’s great-grandmother *was not a Jew*.

Along comes Jesus Who takes the whole concept of neighbor to another level and puts love of neighbor on an equal plane with love of self. Jesus considers that commandment to be a logical and natural consequence of loving God and claims that love is to include all the energy of our hearts and souls and minds and strength. Just as Jesus breaks down the walls we erect between ourselves and our Creator, so Jesus the Christ invites us to break down the walls that compel us to see others as different, others as enemy, others as anything but neighbors we would love and about whose needs we would be concerned. Whenever we sing “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” we are invited to look beyond any barriers we erect and see that we part of God’s one family. In addition, we are to look beyond national and state boundaries, in the case of our country, beyond a map of blue states and red states and in mid-term elections, purple states, those whose voting electorate sends people of both parties to the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Beyond the political brouhaha of our current political climate, there is a modicum of hope that come Wednesday, all of us in this great country will find ways to work together for the common good to find constructive ways to face the challenges of our economy, the war on terrorism, conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care, immigration policies, fair taxation, and all of the ways we interact within our borders and with the people of the world, people who still hope if not expect to find in us the ways of hope and peace and prosperity.

To be sure, there are people “out there” who want to do bad things to others. God knows, there are terrorists both within and without our borders who would do people harm. Yes, there need to be laws and rules and mechanisms to keep people safe, but if in our fear of “others,” we so wall ourselves, separate ourselves, and force divisions between and among ourselves to the point that we are no longer able to see others as neighbors, as God-fearing, God-loving, God-loved people, then we will be all the poorer, all the narrower of focus, and all the more afraid of “others” and then ... afraid of our own shadows.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark is typical of that gospel – the “Great Commandment” is nice and succinct, short and sweet. In the longer rendering in the Gospel of Luke, the exchange of words between Jesus and a teacher includes a follow-up question. When the teacher then asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor,” we are treated to the story of a Samaritan, normally viewed as an enemy of the Jewish people, as the one who is neighborly towards the man who “fell among thieves.” For the Jews of Jesus’ day, for a Samaritan to be called good was a foreign concept. To embrace a Samaritan as a good neighbor was as unwelcome as acknowledging that a Moabite, Ruth, had contributed to their DNA. A defining corollary comes in the first Letter of John where we read,

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother [or sister], he is a liar.

Love of God, love of self and love of neighbor are so much a part of each other, so essential to how we live as Christians, that when we falter if not fail in any one of those, love of God, self and neighbor, *we fail in all three*. To shut others out impoverishes the self and, indeed, often leads to a sense of ego that is far less than it could be as one loved, graced and redeemed by God through Christ. How true it is that the person or nation that acts with bravado and bluster has lost its sense of identity, lost its grounding in humility and ... lost its ability to look to God – and to God’s gift of others for that which would enrich us in so many wonderful ways.

The Great Wall of China defined the boundaries of that land. The walls of Rothenburg defined the limits of that medieval city. As well intended were those barriers, they did more than keep others out for they all the more narrowly defined the people *within*. We need to examine the walls we construct, psychological barriers we build with people in the work place, persons of different languages, nations of origin, ethnic backgrounds, social and economic standing, ... on which “side of the tracks” we think we live – and wonder, yes, at least *wonder*, if like the tumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, if it isn’t time to look beyond the walls in our lives that separate us from God, separate us from others, and keep us from being all we can be as women and men of faith. You see, in defining neighbor – in defining who that neighbor is and defining love of that neighbor ... *we define ourselves*. We demonstrate to God who we are, the degree to which we are faithful to our calling and how willing we are to put that which we profess and believe into acts of ministry and mission and compassion.

I sat at my computer as I finished this and went back to the screen where I had used google maps to zoom in on the walled city of Rothenburg. I thought of the year 2010, when I hope to escort a group from this congregation to Germany to see the Passion play as presented once a decade in the Bavarian town of Oberammergau. When we visit Germany, we will also walk the streets of Berlin, Frankfurt, Köln, München, Leipzig, Nuremberg, Rothenburg, and yes, for those who will join me, we will visit another walled place. With google, you can zoom in on that infamous little town in Bavaria, north of Munich that is on the way to Rothenburg. Yes, you will get a sinking feeling in your stomach knowing what went on inside those walls between and among Germans who were once known as the most neighborly in all of Europe who, because they were convinced they should be afraid, resorted to participating in one of humanity's greatest examples of inhumanity. The Dachau Concentration Camp, in the beautiful State of Bavaria, stands as a monument to ugly and unthinkable acts – acts committed beyond high walls.

Not surprisingly, I was more than happy to go back to an emotionally safer image of Rothenburg and safer, less tearful thoughts of how Oberammergau really *is* in Bavaria with its capital city, Landeshauptstadt, Munich– and again of how people define themselves, sometimes in so very narrow ways. The people of Rothenburg have, naturally, long outgrown the original walls. The city has spread beyond the medieval barriers that once delimited its boundary. With a click of the mouse, I zoomed out from the satellite image of the central square of Rothenburg. After just one click, I had zoomed out to see the entire perimeter of the original city. One more click out brought the winding Tauber River to the west into view. The third click allowed me to now see the sprawling town beyond the walls, to gaze at the fields and forests that surround the area. On the ninth zoom out, the cities disappeared, at the eleventh, the German alps were in the bottom part of the screen. Still zooming out, there was central Europe, then the northern tip of Africa appeared and finally in the sixteenth perspective, all of God's glorious creation, devoid of walls, devoid of boundaries, devoid of all that separates, like a crystal globe covered with lines wiped clean!

Our challenge is to outgrow the walls we construct, zoom out from the narrow perspectives of our lives we think sufficient. In so doing, we learn the lesson of Ruth as refined by the lessons of Christ. In so doing, we better understand how to define neighbor, how to be more neighborly, and in the process, discover how to define and love self. You see, Ruth was first and foremost comfortable in her “own skin,” and in so being, she could see herself as more than a Moabite and indeed, when married to Boaz, more than the spouse of a Jew. Ruth was, simply put, a child of the Most High Glorious God and in so being she was and is a neighbor and a mother to us all.

All of this is part and parcel of how much we love our God, how willing we are to do our Creator's bidding, how much we are willing to give of ourselves for God's work, knowing that we are, incredibly and undeserving, graced by Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and able to move forward as members of the one church, God's family, to serve the needs of God, ourselves and all of God's people.

Amen.