

Easter 5C 2019, Acts 11:1-18, May 19, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church,  
Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

We only had one dog as a pet in our house when I was growing up. She was a little mixed breed terrier my younger sister named “Lady.” Though she really looked more like the Tramp. Lady was an energetic and fun dog to have around. But every once in a while Lady would bolt out of our backyard and run away. We’d hop on our bikes or my mother would get in the car and go look for her. I remember one time we found her over a mile away running around Kissel Hill Elementary School.

These were the days before the “Invisible Fences” that are popular among dog owners today. You most likely know how they work, even if you don’t own a dog. A wire is buried around the perimeter of your yard and small flags are placed where the wire is buried. The dog wears a collar that will beep if the dog gets close the wire. An additional warning cue not to cross the wire is a mild electric shock which the dog finds unpleasant. So the invisible fence provides three different stimuli to condition the dog to stay in the yard and not cross over to the other side. Given enough training many dog owners don’t even need to turn on the electric current, the dog has become so conditioned not to stray.

That’s what’s really going on in the first reading we heard this morning from the book of Acts. Peter is confronted with the “invisible fence” that keeps him safely in the back yard of his religion. The invisible fence consisted of an elaborate set of rules and regulations that Jews observe called “kashrut,” or we might say “keeping kosher.” The word means “fit” or “proper.” There are foods that are kosher and there are ways that food is prepared that is kosher. Kosher food and preparation is a hallmark of Jewish identity.

The rules of keeping kosher are found in the Bible, the portion we call the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament. Permitted foods include mammals that have both cloven hooves and chew their cud. So Jews are permitted to eat beef, but not pork. Fish that have both fins and scales are permitted; so salmon is good but shrimp are not. Birds of prey, or any animal that preys on other animals is not permitted. No reptiles or insects are permitted, except one variety of locust. Meat must be totally drained of its blood before it is consumed, and meat may not be mixed with milk of any kind.

Some say the kosher laws are an ancient form of food hygiene. And there may be some truth in that. But other scholars believe that God gave Jews the laws of kashrut as a test of their faith and obedience. As I said it was, and still is, a hallmark of Jewish identity. It’s a kind of invisible fence that helps maintain Jewish solidarity. Because Jews who strictly observe kosher laws can’t be sure if

the food they eat outside their community is fit or proper they would not eat in the home of someone who is not Jewish themselves.

That's why Peter was criticized. "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" In other words, "you crossed the fence line, why did you do that?"

Sitting here, two thousand years later, and we might not think of this as a big deal. But remember Peter grew up with a lifetime of conditioning to stay inside his religious community backyard. It would be like your dog, used to years and years of wearing the collar, seeing the little flags around the yard, hearing the beep and feeling the mild shock to keep him in the yard, suddenly having the collar removed, the flags put away the electricity turned off. Does he stay in the yard on his own? Does he take the risk and venture close the line?

God gave Peter the vision that turned off the electricity, removed the flags, silenced the bell, took off the collar and allowed Peter and the other disciples to move out of their backyard of Judaism into the Gentile world. But it must have been difficult, when that first pork chop crossed his lips, or eating fresh shrimp salad. He had grown up believing that not eating those things meant he was being faithful and obedient to God. And you know what, he was right. He was being faithful and obedient. But God was doing a new thing, providing a new vision, helping Peter see that this new way of being faithful meant trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit. For it was the Holy Spirit who was going out ahead of Peter, into the homes of gentiles like Cornelius, stirring up faith so that they too might come to believe in the forgiveness and new life which comes through Jesus Christ.

So, where is the invisible fence in your life? We all have them, someplace. The fence that keeps you safe in the yard where everything is known and the world on the other side is regarded as dangerous and even impure. You realize that the resurrection of Jesus Christ turned off the current of the invisible fence and removed the collar which beeped and shocked when you got too close, don't you? But we are conditioned by that fence. Long years of being told there is danger on the other side and you must not go near keeps us from crossing over.

We are all conditioned in some way that prevents us from living the life of love and faith in God to its fullest. Maybe you are conditioned by race or ethnicity to regard those different from yourself as threat and danger or simply undesirable. Gender orientation, political affiliation, perceived class differences, where someone goes to church, or they aren't religious at all. These, and lots of others, are the invisible fences by which we are conditioned to stay put in our safe yard.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit turned off the fence for Peter and all others so that they might move out into the unknown and yes even threatening world of the gentiles. That was God's act, because God wanted Peter to step over that line he had been conditioned never to cross. But in doing so the Good News of Jesus' life of love and forgiveness came even to the

Gentiles. To us. If God had not turned off the invisible fence and Peter had not been willing to cross we would not be here today, as believers in Jesus Christ.

Where is the Holy Spirit leading you today? What boundaries and fence lines are you being invited to cross? What have you been so conditioned to avoid that God is inviting you to see in a new light and a new opportunity to show Christ-like love and forgiveness?

We are all being led by the Holy Spirit opening our eyes and hearts to new opportunities to serve, to love, to show Christ to others. And we all have fence lines that need to be crossed. But we trust in the one who rose from the dead, who crossed that ultimate and final barrier of death and now lives. There is no barrier which cannot be crossed, no fence that holds back from a life of love for others, because Jesus has broken down the walls, turned off the fence, and moves out ahead of us bidding us to only follow him. Amen.