

The Boundaries of Love
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First Reading from Brené Brown, *Rising Strong*, pages 114-15.

Reading from Prentis Hemphill¹

Sermon

Boundaries. It is wonderful to see you; but no, you can't take my trunk and make a boat out of it. I enjoy doing things with you; but I need you to show up on time. I know you have other things going on, but I need you to do the dishes when it's your turn. I know you're hurting, but the way you're talking to me right now is not OK. Thank you for thinking of me for this volunteer role, but I need to say no.

Boundaries. Expressions of what we're willing to do or tolerate - our expectation of how others will behave toward us, around us, in ways that affect us. A boundary is communicated clearly and kindly – the tree modeled that for us. And, if it's disregarded, we follow through – not with anger or punishment, but by changing our response to the situation. That (Brown and Hemphill tell us) is how we stay out of resentment and in deepening relationship as our most compassionate selves.

“Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously.”²

Boundaries don't always feel good. They're hard when we want to be liked, which most of us do. They're hard when we equate love with selflessness. They're hard if we're tired or unsure, because, Brown says, it is easier to be resentful than to be clear about what's okay and what's not okay, and to stick to it.

And boundaries may be especially hard for Unitarian Universalists. We speak of a love that knows no boundaries. We strive to push the boundaries of unjust systems and power structures. We draw the circle wider. We reach across boundaries, break through boundaries... .

Boundaries separate us. We don't like boundaries.

And, yet ... A tree with love and a generous heart and no boundaries, ends up a stump who helped shape a pretty selfish human (at least that's my reading of the original story). Love needs boundaries. Not boundaries on the love – the tree in our story doesn't love the boy any less because she has clear boundaries about what she will and won't do for him. But boundaries that are themselves a loving act.

“Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously.”

Nedra Glover Tawwab is a therapist who writes that – at the root of most issues she encounters – is a boundary problem. A missing boundary, a porous boundary, a boundary that isn't respected.

¹ <https://open.spotify.com/show/3FUEqQ4aPQstyanxBaFxfF?si=4beb5da27d9c4bfe&nd=1>. This section starts around 40min

² Id.

“Boundaries,” she says, “will set you free.”³ They build healthy relationships, with other people, and with communities, like this one.

Last time I was in the pulpit (2 weeks ago), we explored accountability as a chosen personal practice. And the question arose ... what happens when someone we’re in relationship with isn’t choosing to practice accountability in a way that allows us to “remain intact and out of resentment?”

Tawwab, Hemphill and Brown tell us that the answer, if the relationship matters, is boundaries.

If we’re not used to thinking about relationships this way, boundaries can seem harsh. A boundary is not negotiated. Other people don’t have to agree with your boundaries, and you don’t have to agree with theirs. What matters is that we respect each other’s boundaries, anyway. That can take some getting used to.

And, we know that behavior that hurts another often arises out of deep pain. Telling someone in pain that you will not tolerate something they’re doing, and then following through (or being the person receiving that boundary), can feel unkind, unloving.

Brene Brown shares an example of her daughter being mistreated on social media by a friend.⁴ She says her daughter was reluctant to set a boundary because she thought her friend acting out because of their own pain. Here’s Brene Brown’s response: “I believe it comes down to a simple question: **Can you be kind and respectful to your friend if they are hurting you?** The answer is no, and this leads to a couple of choices: The easy solution is to be unkind and disrespectful back, or to walk away. The courageous answer is to look at this friend and say, “I care about you and I’m sorry that you’re going through a hard time. But I need to talk to you about what’s okay and what’s not okay.”

Setting a boundary begins with that communication – clearly and kindly conveying what it is that you need to stay in relationship and remain “intact” and out of resentment. Boundaries vary from person to person, and depending on culture and context. Even in long-standing relationships, we can’t assume that our boundaries are understood unless we communicate them.

There are situations where we can’t communicate what we need. Perhaps the person won’t listen, can’t hear it right now; perhaps it would be unsafe to have that conversation. We can still set limits or walk away, but that’s different from a boundary. Boundary-setting is a tool for deepening relationships that aren’t dangerous, and that matter.

Sometimes the hardest part of setting a boundary is figuring out what it is that we need. Tawwab says we often don’t understand what our feelings are trying to tell us – we recognize that something is off, but we have trouble naming it. We can also get stuck in a conviction that what the relationship needs is for someone else to change. The idea that “It’s them, not me,” says Tawwab⁵ gets in the way of healthy boundaries. But we can’t change anyone else. All we can change is our own response.

And Tawwab identifies other barriers. Sometimes we don’t set a boundary because we don’t believe it will work. Maybe we tried before and nothing changed. Maybe we doubt our ability to follow through or to tolerate the discomfort.

But often the biggest barrier to healthy boundaries is our fear of the worst – someone might get angry and act out, someone might be hurt, we might lose the relationship altogether.

³ Nedra Glover Tawwab, *Set Boundaries, Find Peace*, xv.

⁴ Brene Brown, *Rising Strong* 126

⁵ Page 49

Say it's your tradition to invite friends over for a Thanksgiving meal and football. It's usually fun, but last year, one of your friends said some really disrespectful things, and you couldn't enjoy it. You could just decide not to invite that friend anymore. You could invite them again without saying anything, and hope this year is better. Or you might say "I'd like to have you over again, but I need you to be more respectful when you're there." Then get specific about what happened last time that can't happen again - and if your boundary is not respected, you follow through - even asking your friend to leave if necessary.

Your boundary might be well received. It might not. This friend might get angry, might tell you it's not fair that you pick on them this way, you're just a snowflake and can't handle a joke. They might want to argue or debate. They might complain about you to all your other friends. They might never talk to you again.

All of that is possible. Not everyone is able to receive a boundary right now. But if it's your boundary - if that's the distance at which you can love both them and yourself - and stay out of resentment - the most loving thing to do is to communicate it. And it is possible that you'll be able to both enjoy the game and deepen your relationship with your friend. Boundaries can set us free.

That kind of communication and follow-through is pretty far away from weighted blankets and hot cocoa. It's much easier to just complain to our other friends about how awful it is to be around this one. And so often, that's what happens. And we grow increasingly disappointed, angry, resentful ... less able to be compassionate, less able to stay in relationship.

So if we find ourselves complaining a lot about someone to other people, there's a good chance that we have slid into resentment, that we have work to do on our boundaries.

In our first reading, Brown offers an insight that can help with the discomfort of boundaries. She recommends starting from a generous assumption that this person is doing the best they can right now. Not to excuse what they're doing, but to help pull ourselves out of judgment and resentment and trying to change someone else. That generous assumption helps keep our focus on what we need, what we can change, and where the boundary is that allows us to be compassionate.

If we don't want to go through life resentful, if we want to have relationships that last and are fulfilling, if we want to be compassionate, Brown, Hemphill and Tawwab tell us:

1. Be clear about what you need
2. Say what you need directly to the person involved; and
3. Live with the discomfort as you follow through

Boundary-setting goes hand-in-hand with recognizing the boundaries others have set for us. Everywhere we build relationships with people, we can practice both, as acts of love.

One of those places where we can practice is this church.

Lots of congregations have trouble setting boundaries, for all the reasons I mentioned. And in Unitarian Universalist churches, we are prone to taking our celebration of the individual to an extreme - sometimes any attempt to limit anyone's actions is perceived as not respecting their inherent worth and dignity. In many of our churches, including this one, while healthy boundaries do happen, they're not a cultural norm.

But "Can you be kind and respectful to your friend if they are hurting you? The answer is no."

Without boundaries, we end up tolerating harm, and the relationship-destroying resentment that comes with it. Without boundaries, what you get in any community is complaining about each other. And we become less generous, less compassionate, less loving. More resentful.

When we talk about people “burning out” in a church – that’s also a boundary problem. Someone cares deeply, so they take on more and more - they grow tired, feel unappreciated, overworked, isolated, and ultimately resentful. Love and generosity, without boundaries, can’t be sustained.

In churches, we sometimes speak of the “sacred no” – saying no when asked to do something because that’s **“the distance at which you can love yourself and this community simultaneously.”** The person Dick spoke of was doing just that. That is a boundary. And I’ve seen other people here do that, kindly and gracefully.

But there are ways in which healthy boundaries are not yet fully part of this church’s culture. And there is, sometimes, a reluctance to try because we might not be doing it right.

But in real life, boundary setting is always imperfect. It’s always possible to see ways we could have done it better. If the recipient of a boundary wants to pick apart what you said and did, and point out mistakes, they always can. But imperfection does not make your boundary any less a loving act.

My hope for us all, is that we learn from mistakes, do it better next time, but don’t let the imperfection that is inherent in this practice cause us to back away from a boundary that we need to love both ourselves and another. I hope we can offer ourselves, and those setting boundaries for us, a little grace.

Because, my take-home message is – along with a personal practice of accountability - “practice boundaries.” Tend to the spaces in between us. It’s OK to start small. And it’s OK to try it here - help one another to

1. Be clear about what you need;
2. Say what you need directly; and
3. Live with the discomfort as you follow through.

That we may be ever more generous, loving and compassionate with ourselves, one another, and the world,

May it be so.

Amen