

The Undiscriminating Spirit

At the end of last week, a caravan of refugees, which now numbers about 200 people finally arrived at the US border near San Diego. The so-called caravan consists mostly families, of women and children who are trying to escape intolerable levels of violence in their home countries of Honduras and El Salvador. These people, like so many others in different parts of the world, only wanted to cross the border into a country where they might be safe and build a life. As is the usual procedure, they were stopped at the border. Over the last week, a few at a time, they were taken into the border center and processing was begun to see if they were eligible for asylum and admission to this country.

Who do we let in? How do we choose? These are the questions at the heart of the immigration debate in this country, but they're also questions we ask at a lot of other places, from the time we choose up teams on the playground at school to the time you bring your girlfriend or boyfriend home to meet the family for the first time to the college admissions process, to job hiring to right here in the church.

Those are important questions. They help us define our identity. Who is one of us? Who is not? They help us draw boundaries around our social relationships and understand who we're connected to and who we're different from.

For example, for Peter in our scripture today, an important part of his identity, even as a follower of Jesus, was as a Jew. Being a Jew meant there were certain things you didn't eat and certain people you didn't hang out with. You didn't eat pork or shellfish. You didn't go into a Gentile's house. Those were marks of his faith and his culture, part of the way he and others could identify him and know who he was. He would have said it was part of what made him holy and acceptable to God. Who could come into his Jewish in-group? People who were willing to fully abide by Jewish law, including obeying the rules about what you could eat and having all the males circumcised.

Those boundaries we build around who can come in and how we make those choices are set up not only to help us understand where we fit in the world but also, we think, for our own protection. When we start thinking about our boundaries that way “The other” however that other person is defined, can become a threat because they’re not like us, they don’t fit in. When we begin to fall into that kind of thinking, the walls we build around ourselves for comfort and protection become a trap, boxing us in.

It never occurred to Peter or his companions that those rules that had always defined them might fall away. Those rules were just “the way things were” until that day in Caesarea, when they learned that God had been speaking to “those people” too.