

Stories about Setting Boundaries*
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1. Fences and Neighbors



This past winter Sylvia watched her next-door neighbors set up a portable basketball hoop on their driveway. The hoop provided great entertainment and pleasurable physical activity for the two neighbor children and their friends. This was fine with Sylvia as long as the ground was frozen and covered with snow. As the snow began to melt, she could foresee problems.

One of Sylvia's favorite hobbies is growing plants, both indoors and out. In recent years, she has been converting more and more of her front and side yards from lawn to flower beds. One of her perennial beds is directly adjacent to the neighbors' driveway. With all the basketball activity, she began to worry about the stray basketballs, and even more, about the damage done by feet chasing after them.

The neighbors' property includes about a foot of ground beyond their cement driveway alongside Sylvia's yard. Their border strip is grown up mostly in weeds, with a few battered but resilient day lilies determined to survive their unfavorable circumstances. To the untrained eye, frozen weeds in winter looked much like Sylvia's frozen perennials. With no visible boundary marker, the kids did not know where their property ended and Sylvia's began. As spring approached, feet pounded the thawing ground, sinking deeply into the soft mud as children chased after basketballs.

At first, when the ball bounced over into Sylvia's yard, she asked the children politely not to walk on her flowerbeds. She welcomed them to use her sidewalk or grass pathways and thought this generous enough. After they had ignored her requests many times, she decided it was time for a new approach. She retrieved some rusty 12-inch tall border fencing from her

* Names and details in these true stories were changed to protect privacy. Photo is from Ozark Gardens:
http://www.ozarkgardens.com/pv/TRtWn/59/16/CynfLs/eJNLLypVOrRfePL/basketball_garden_jpg.html.

garage to mark the property line. It took a little doing to press it past the soft surface mud into the frozen ground beneath, but she eventually managed to get it to stand up.

For Elena, the five-year-old girl, this was enough. She had helped Sylvia often with planting, weeding, and watering, and she wanted to protect the flowers she had learned to appreciate. Once she knew where the property line was, she stayed off the flowerbeds. Not so for Daniel, her older brother. The tiny fence only stopped him when he knew Sylvia was watching. If she wasn't outside or observed watching him through the window, as soon as the ball went bouncing into her yard, off he'd run after it, easily stepping over the fence, his sneakers gouging deep holes in the thawing ground.

Sylvia would throw open the window, and in the sweetest voice she could muster, ask, "Can you please stay on the grass or the sidewalk?" After this had repeated a dozen or so times, one day she lost her temper and shouted at Daniel through the open window, "I told you half a dozen times already—*Please stay out of my flowerbeds!*"

When Sylvia was outside later, cleaning up dead vegetation, Elena, as usual, arrived to help. "My brother doesn't like you any more because you yelled at him," she confided. Sylvia could see she was building a reputation as the archetypal crotchety old lady of the neighborhood, and she hated the role!

Marking the boundary wasn't working. Polite requests weren't working. Yelling wasn't working. Sylvia needed another strategy if her hostas were going to survive the season. Furthermore, she needed a new strategy if she was going to ever live down her expanding reputation as neighborhood witch. As warmer weather arrived, she acquired a roll of wire fencing and a bunch of steel fence posts at a garage sale. She rented a post-hole digger and a fence-post driver and went to work. Soon she had sore muscles and a four-foot wire fence marking out the property line the length of the driveway. This blocked most of the stray balls and all of the feet from landing on her flowerbed. Her plants were safe. Best of all, she could stop nagging and griping.

Now that the fence is in place, Elena has become Sylvia's helper and friend once again. Though Daniel is still wary, at least his hostility is no longer building, and he is free to enjoy active outdoor play without harming anything or causing resentment.

The fence marked both a geographic and a personal boundary. When Sylvia found herself repeating the same responses and getting nowhere, she realized she was stuck and searched for an alternative approach. The fence let the children know where their property ended and where Sylvia's began. It reflected realistic self-assessment for Sylvia: she was simply unable to watch the yard every minute the children were out playing. It reflected Sylvia's realistic view of the situation: Basketballs bounce and roll. Boys who don't care much about plants will chase balls through flowerbeds if they think they can get away with it.

By putting up the fence, Sylvia let go of non-productive attempts to control her neighbors. By taking advantage of what she could control, she made it less convenient for them to run through her property. Although the new fence took some energy to install, after it was in place, she no longer used up emotional energy trying to control a situation over which she had little influence. Boundaries she supplied created room for her relationship with the neighbor children to survive and grow.

2. When Boundaries Create Space for Healing

Often we shy away from setting boundaries because we don't want to be perceived as unkind. Appropriate boundaries can be set in ways that respect the best interests of others around us, although the people affected may not immediately recognize their benefit. Robert tells a story about a time he was on the receiving end of boundaries that he initially did not understand but ultimately found beneficial.

Robert lives with clinical depression and has had it most of his life. He has received many years of counseling in the process of treating his illness, which is currently in remission thanks to effective medication, hard work in therapy, and God's abundant grace. At one point, many years ago, his depression had hit a particular low. He overcame his reluctance and began seeing a counselor. The price was right: Counseling was provided at no cost by his employer, a not-for-profit agency. The absence of fees was a significant reason he'd had the courage to seek help. This counselor typically assisted agency employees who were working in remote locations. Robert, on the other hand, worked alongside the counselor in the central offices and saw him every day on the job. For one hour a week Robert would see him for counseling, sometimes sandwiched between tasks in the middle of the workday.

The arrangement initially seemed like a good idea, but in Robert's circumstances, it turned out to be less than ideal. The counseling began to evoke a lot of strong feelings. Robert was self-conscious about emerging from a session looking visibly upset. He found it hard to move from such intensity right back into the job. More than that, awkward feelings would tend to rise up unpredictably when he saw the counselor during the course of the day. They made it hard to concentrate on the job. Yet the counseling did help carry him through several rough months until his mood stabilized.

Fast forward ten years. During another period of stress, Robert began seeing Jeff, a different counselor. Since he was no longer working for the same agency, he paid the standard fees to see Jeff. He saw him only during therapy sessions.

In Robert's first session with Jeff, he described a boundary that he practiced with all his clients: not to have physical contact. His explicit boundary excluding touch was helpful because Robert knew where he stood from the outset. He did not use up energy thinking about touch. Preoccupation about it did not distract him from the healing work at hand. He did not have to worry about overstepping or misinterpreting Jeff's boundaries—they were clear—and there was safety in that clarity.

Robert developed a strong therapeutic relationship with Jeff that spanned many years. Within this relationship he experienced healing from childhood abuse. As before, the therapy evoked intense feelings. At times he felt like a bottomless pit of emotional need. The week between sessions felt like a long time. However, seeing Jeff only once a week helped kept the emotional turmoil relatively confined. This compartmentalization helped him manage the rest of his life. He could plan therapy days with a little extra time to regain his bearings. One day a week he faced the trauma of the past and, with Jeff's support, worked on healing. The rest of the week, at least most of the time, he could live in the present. Limiting when they saw each other was an important boundary because it kept Robert relatively functional. It took him a long time to realize what a benefit this was. Over time, through his steady relationship with Jeff, he came to trust that his needs would not overpower others and drive them away.

Jeff's boundaries were no doubt good for Jeff. They enabled him to remain fully present to Robert while Robert was working through intense emotion, and to renew his own energies

between sessions. More than that, Robert came to realize that Jeff's boundaries were also good for Robert. They created space for a caring relationship marked by safety, persistence, and resilience. They facilitated his functioning in the rest of life. They allowed him to stay focused on the healing work he needed to do, which eventually contributed to a new sense of self-confidence.

As Robert experienced the healing power of living within boundaries, he became more able to set firm limits with his teenage daughters. He knows that even when they accuse him of being unfair, they need the benefits of living within boundaries that respect the people around them. He hopes that some day they will recognize the value of the limits he insists on.

3. Ouch! When Boundaries Hurt

We sometimes shy away from setting boundaries because we don't want to hurt another person. We would rather not risk offending the other by setting limits. Yet when we fail to set limits that respect our own genuine needs, too often the cost is our withdrawal from the relationship. Setting necessary boundaries in order to maintain a friendship offers opportunities for God's grace to intervene. When boundaries enable us to persist in a caring relationship, even hurt feelings can become a source of significant learning.

Like many families who live with disability, Laura's has weathered times that taxed the coping abilities of every family member. During the height of one period of intense stress, Laura went to her pastor for help. Her pastor offered help, but in the process set boundaries on the help he offered—boundaries that Laura found hurtful. Yet from the experience, Laura learned a great deal. What can we learn from her story?

During the years her two children were in middle school, friction between Laura's various family members was escalating day by day. Jeremy, her eleven-year-old son, was in sixth grade and had Asperger syndrome. Like many middle schoolers on the autism spectrum, he was often the target of bullying at school. He was typically so on edge after a hard day at school that he would pick a fight with his older sister the moment they walked in the front door, if not sooner.

Conflict between the unruly children and their orderly father, who had a dash of autism himself, kept emotions boiling. Eventually Jeremy was diagnosed with depression, which often shows up as heightened irritability in adolescent boys. His depression proved difficult to treat. Jeremy refused to cooperate with counseling. Medication might bring a period of calm for a time, but this would end in even greater emotional explosiveness when a given medication would abruptly stop working. The roller coaster of extreme ups and downs was sucking the life out of the whole family. Laura's depression, which had been under control for years, was reemerging in response to the stress. It eroded her ability to cope and respond creatively.

When medications that had been working tolerably well for Jeremy began to fail yet again, the realization hit Laura forcefully that they were in a "new normal" of perpetual crisis. And they were in it for the long haul. She was ashamed to admit she was not coping. For the sake of her kids, though, she pushed herself outside her comfort zone and turned to her pastor. Was there any support the church could provide?

The pastor arranged for a group to meet with Laura occasionally to provide support. However, what Laura's family needed went far beyond the support the pastor could offer. Crises were unfolding on a daily basis. Moreover, no end of the upheaval was in sight, certainly not within the few months that the pastor had asked the group to meet. Laura tried accept the help

gratefully, but struggled with its limits. She felt too ashamed to ask for more. She judged herself harshly for causing the mess in her family. She found herself focusing her hurt on the careful boundaries in the pastor's response, unable to address how her own shame and self-judgment also contributed.

One evening, when only one member of the support group remembered and showed up for a scheduled meeting, Laura's hurt spilled out. The member listened thoughtfully to Laura's story and relayed what she heard to the pastor and others in the group. Through creative thinking and intentionally responding to what they heard, the support group developed an alternate plan.

The new arrangement better met the needs of Laura and her family without laying too big a burden on any one person. The women in the group took turns checking in with Laura. Each week someone would invite her over for some empathetic listening. This was a great help since depression kept Laura from initiating contact with friends. One of the group served as coordinator, relieving the pastor of the responsibility. One man in the group agreed to give Laura and her husband his cell phone number to be on call for times when Jeremy became physically threatening. The revised plan was sustainable and continued over several years, until the needs subsided. During this time, Laura's family also found ways to connect with wider community resources that supplemented the church's support.

From these experiences, Laura learned that some problems exceed a congregation's ability to solve them, despite members' caring intentions. Nevertheless, Laura learned that people who accompany consistently, even within limits, can still be channels of God's grace and love. She watched creative thinking stretch the congregation's limited resources. As she has received the tangible support of the body of Christ through times of crisis, she has a deeper sense of God's care for her family. She learned to direct some of her energies to hurts from her past that needed attention and healing. This brought new opportunity to heal old wounds. In the end, she learned that her hurt from encountering boundaries was real, but survivable. She has learned that she need not fear boundaries—neither the ones others set, nor the ones she needs to set in her family.

With Laura and her family, we may learn that that God can use our experiences of hurt and healing to form us into compassionate people, able to share God's love with others. Thanks be to God.