

*Come Holy Spirit
Use me to Your glory*

Precious Pilgrim,

I had the most unusual of Ascension Days. My husband and I live right outside of Oxford, England. He is a Professor of American History for the University. We attend St. Mary the Virgin Anglican Church, which is the University Church.

One of this church's traditions (needless to say, being 720 years old, there are a lot of traditions) is the "beating of the boundaries." This ceremony has taken place on Ascension Day since The Middle Ages.

I didn't know what was in store, but was anxiously looking forward to the experience. We started with an 8:30 Holy Communion Service in the Chapel. At its conclusion, the congregation, clergy, and a class of schoolboys gathered in the main sanctuary for brief instructions. We were told that we were to visit four colleges adjacent to the church grounds. They were Brasenose, All Souls, University and Oriel. At each one, we would mark the appropriate stone. "Marking" meant first drawing with chalk a cross and then the initials S.M.V., which stood for St. Mary the Virgin Church, and then the year. The second part of marking the boundary was to hit the stone with long wooden cane poles. As the six designated strikers would hit, we would yell, "Mark!, Mark!, Mark!, Mark!." Having been well instructed, we then were off to make the rounds.

We were met at each college by an official who greeted us.

After performing our duty of "Marking the Boundaries" (as you can imagine the 11 year-old boys were the most enthusiastic of the stone hitters), we would then sing one or two hymns. After which, we were shown hospitality by each college -- Brasenose gave us chocolate; University gave us ice cream. The Master of Oriel threw coins and candy out of his upstairs window and All Souls gave its customary cherry cake. The reason for this custom is that the college's central quadrangle originally belonged to the church and was a cherry orchard. After purchase, the college cut down the trees, as compensation it yearly gives cherry cake to St. Mary's Church on Ascension Day.

It was a fun activity. Some of the stones were hard to reach -- hidden in gardens or high up on a wall. There really was some work in getting the job properly done. And why, why has that ritual been in place for hundreds of years? It was very important to know where a church's boundaries lay. Early on, few read or wrote. There were no surveyors to accurately mark out territory. It was imperative that these boundaries were known, for each parish was responsible for taking care of its needy -- widows, orphans, poor, disabled, sick, dying, elderly. It was the church's responsibility to take care of those within its boundaries.

Even though the world has changed and those responsibilities are no longer solely the church's, it was a grand reminder of not only this early church's life, but even the very early 1st century church's life.

Listen to the world of the early church as described by Luke in Acts 4:32-35 -- "all the believers were one in heart and mind." No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time, those who owned lands and houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

And Acts 2:42-47 says --

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together but had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Boundaries. Marked in stone -- boundaries. That is what I have been dealing with this day. Somehow, they feel rather tight, tight, especially on this day of all days. Ascension Day. Ascension Day was when boundaries were lifted or at least

stretched or changed or rearranged as our Lord Jesus Christ ascended to be with His Father God to reign for all eternity.

Marked in stone boundaries might have made sense for the Middle Age world and thank the dear Lord, they did take care of those that needed it. As for us modern day Christians, might we be called to go beyond the boundaries or at least allow those boundaries to be stretched by the Holy Spirit?

I just recently read the book, The Prayer of Jabez, by Bruce Wilkinson, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I especially like meditating on this prayer found in I Chronicles 4:9-10.

“And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, ‘Oh, that you would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory, that your hand would be with me and that you would keep me from evil that I may not cause pain.’”

That sounds like a stretch, doesn't it, Pilgrim? And listen to the words of Isaiah 54: 2,3, and 13, which I put in song form a few years ago to help me remember the verses.

F A A# C D E F

“Enlarge the place of your tent

F E D G B C

Stretch your tent curtains wide,

D E F C

do not hold back

D E F C

lengthen your cords

D E F C

strengthen your stakes

F A# A A# CA# C D F F E F

For you will spread out to the right and to the left

F F A# C D C A# A G F

Your descendants will dispossess nations,

F A# C D C A# A# A G F

and settle in their desolate cities.

F F A# A A# C A# C D

All your sons will be taught by the Lord,

F D C D F F E F

and great will be your children's peace."

Ah, Pilgrim, it was fun having candy and cake and ice cream today. It was fun singing and marking boundaries. A good tradition. A grander tradition, however, one set up not hundreds, but rather thousands of years ago, is to let the Holy Spirit set the bounds, stretch the bounds. No telling how large the expansion.

Our Lord Jesus did say in Mark 16:15, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." That sounds pretty boundless, don't you think?

And Paul said in Ephesians 3: 8.9 -- "Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things."

Boundless -- "Boundless riches of Christ."

That's the thought I'd like to leave with you this day, Pilgrim. May the Holy Spirit continue the expansion of the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Again, may the Holy Spirit continue in the expansion of the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. May we each be instruments of His expansive love -- Boundless love -- sounds like a good world to me. What do you think, Pilgrim?

May all be to our Lord's glory.

Your sister in Christ,

Lucy

God bless.