

Friends, let us pray.
God be in our heads and in our understanding
God be in our eyes and in our looking
God be in our mouths and in our speaking
God be in our hearts and in our thinking
Amen

The title of this morning's sermon is :“Moving out the fences” and finds its roots in this morning's gospel readings of John 21. I chose that piece of scripture specifically for this service, because I think in that story of Christ's appearance to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee are lessons he has for this congregation today, here in West Toronto.

The Bible scholars tell us that Jesus' appearance before the fishermen set out here in John was the third time Christ had appeared to the disciples following his death and resurrection, and his seventh appearance overall.

You'll recall that the first time Christ appeared to some of his disciples was when he suddenly showed up on the road to Emmaus to walk with Cleopas and another unnamed disciple—about 7 miles from Jerusalem.

The second time was when he showed up unexpectedly in the locked room as the disciples cowered in fear. And then a week later we have Christ's famous encounter with “Doubting Thomas”, an event which is so powerful that it's become part of the lexicon of every day life.

And now we have the third appearance of Christ to some of the disciples by the Sea of Galilee.

When taken as a whole there are two important similarities to all of these encounters that the disciples had with his Disciples. The first is that they were all totally unexpected, and the second, as we'll see, is that in *every instance* Christ required his disciples to get moving!

What we know from this piece of scripture is that while the disciples had decided to follow Jesus, up to this point in time they had not yet committed themselves to Christ in a complete and unconditional way.

Some of them were still engaged in their traditional trade as fishermen. I'll confess that I find this a fascinating piece of scripture. Not because the story on the surface is that complicated,—or that I'm attracted to a good fishermen's story—although that will always work, for me.

But what really fascinates me about this story of the disciples becoming full-time *fishers of men*, is what it says to us today, in our individual lives, and our collective lives as we carry out Christ's work here in this congregation.

Just imagine the scene there along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Some Bible scholars think that as many as 8 of the 12 disciples' original occupation was that of a fisherman. We know for sure that Simon, also known as Peter, Andrew, James and John were all fishermen. They've fished all night without any luck. They're tired and frustrated, when suddenly this stranger calls out to them and says

“Children, you have no fish, have you?”

The fishermen reluctantly acknowledge that they've had no luck, at which point this stranger—whom we know to have been a carpenter—not a fisherman—instructs them to cast their nets out of the other side of the boat and assures them that they'll find fish!

How would you have reacted if you'd invested hours in a fruitless pursuit of fish only to have some a kibitzer—one those meddlesome people who look over your shoulder and offer unwanted advice—tell you, a professional fisherman that you'll have success if you simply pull up your nets and throw them off the other side of the boat?

Non one likes to have a kibitzer in their life!

I can remember as a young boy, when a TV technician came to our house to fix the old Black & White television. I was keenly interested in helping this man with his work—as all young boys would be—and he clearly had been faced with the prospect of unwanted help in the past, for on his toolbox was a sign that read:

“My rates—\$25 per hour.
If you watch— \$50 per hour.
If you help—\$75 per hour.”

I seem to recall that visit cost my dad \$75.

In my daily life I'm a computer consultant, and I can tell you nothing annoys me more than to show up to do my work and then have the client offer their advice on what's wrong with their computer system—because I'm confident that I've forgotten more about computers that day than my client has learned in their entire lifetime!

My clients' gratuitous offer to diagnose the problem is not only unwanted, but, as far as I'm concerned, just getting in the way of me solving their problems.

But I can also tell you, if there's one thing that's worse than a kibitzer—it's a kibitzer who's advice is *right!*

And that's what happened here! For here we have Christ, the carpenter walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee—offering gratuitous advice to a very tired group of *professional fishermen*. Not only is the advice gratuitous, and unasked for—but also, on the surface it appears to be pretty strange advice—Christ tells this group of experienced fishermen that the real problem is that they're casting their nets off the left side of the boat—he tells them all they need to do is to cast their

nets off the right side of the boat!

I don't know about you, but I know what I'd have done if I'd received this advice—I'd have ignored it because firstly I didn't solicit the advice, and secondly, on the surface, it was advice that made absolutely no sense!

But for some reason, the Disciples listened and took the kibitzer's advice—that nudging to try something different—and they pulled up their nets and cast them off the right side of the boat—and miracles of miracles—soon their nets were so full of fish that they couldn't even haul the nets back into the boat!

You see, the lesson Christ was trying to tell his disciples was that if they were willing to listen to God, to be faithful to his urgings to try something different—to go in directions that, at first glance, didn't appear to make much sense—that they'd meet with great success in their lives.

I've been thinking a lot about that message over the last while. How we're often confined by our past practices and beliefs—how stuck we are with the “tried and true”—that it prevents us from moving on in our lives.

This intransigence—this unwillingness to move out in yet untried directions represent what I call the “Fences” we've erected in our lives.

Look around us. We encounter fences every where in our lives. They represent physical boundaries that keep us out of places, or sometimes, keep us in certain places. Fences define ownership of property. Fences set limits in our lives—they are a demarcation lines for us—telling us where we can go—and where we can't go.

There's an old Proverb that says: “Good fences make for good

neighbours,” but this past spring in the Toronto Star they published front page stories about a boundary dispute which had arisen between two of Ron and Dorothy Folkes’ neighbours. A new owner of a property has erected a fence right down the middle of a shared mutual driveway to prevent his neighbour from accessing the garage he’s used over the last 30 years which is located at the back of the neighbour’s property. The story evoked outrage and disbelief amongst the Star’s readers as one owner pitted what he perceived his legal rights to be against his neighbour.

I don’t think any reader of those Star articles would ever come to the conclusion that the erection of the fences has done anything but escalate the bad feelings between the two adjoining land owners.

Some fences are certainly needed in our lives. Those around dangerous facilities such as hydro transformers, protect us from injuring ourselves. Municipal bylaws require fences around swimming pools to lessen the chances of a child inadvertently falling into the pool and drowning. Everyone acknowledges that these fences help to provide safety in our lives.

Some fences are erected for commercial reasons—they keep out the non-paying customers.

I can remember as a university student working at the Western Fair grounds in London, erecting the fences which would separate the fair grounds from the parking lots. In the weeks leading up to the annual fair, a portion of one of the parking lots had been rented out to a travelling evangelist for his tent crusade.

As we slaved under the hot August sun to erect the fence in preparation for the upcoming fair, we could hear the voice of the evangelist as it wafted out from under the rolled-up tent walls. He clearly wasn’t happy with our work—or perhaps he was smart enough to take advantage of

the situation—for we could hear that our fence work had become part of his message that afternoon—as his fervent voice thundered out to his followers that we were doing the work of the Devil as he warned his listeners— “They’re tryin’ to fence you out! They’re tryin’ to keep the word of the Lord from you!”

Personally, I always imagined that the Devil would pay me more than \$2.75 an hour for working on his side!

Other fences we encounter are high and foreboding. They become symbols of that fine line that exists between freedom and repression.

For my generation, the Berlin Wall will always be that symbol of the demarcation point for the Iron Curtain. The Berlin Wall was literally where East met West. It was such a powerful image of the Cold War that going to see the Wall was the first stop on my year-long student’s “bum tour” of Europe, that I took in 1969, after completing my undergraduate studies.

Some claim more than 200 people died in their vain attempt to cross that fence line in search of freedom. For 28 years it was the fence between eastern communist ideology and western democracy. The Berlin Wall was both a *real* fence between West Berlin and East Germany but also a *symbolic* fence marking the demarcation point where Western ideology confronted eastern Bloc communism. When first constructed it was the concrete manifestation of the *Iron Wall!*

No one who was live in the early 60s will ever forget president John Kennedy’s famous rallying cry to the people of West Berlin “Ich Bin ein Berliner”—for it linked us all at that fence line.

When the Berlin Wall finally fell on November 9, 1989 the world rejoiced for we all knew we were moving forward—together!

Some fences are even invisible. Recently my sister-in-law installed an “invisible fence” around her rural property to keep her two Golden Lab dogs from wandering, rather than erecting a normal fence. It’s a buried wire which carries a signal. The dogs now wear special collars with electronic sensors in them, and if they stray too close to the “invisible fence” they get a small buzz which tells them they can’t go any further.

But there are other types of invisible fences in our lives that I think this piece of scripture speak to us about.

It is those fences that God has put into our lives to challenge us. It is those fences in our lives, and in the life of this congregation, that I think God has erected to test our faithfulness, that I want to talk about today.

I think sometimes we need fences in our lives because they represent lines of commitment.

I love to golf, and I own almost every golf instructional book that has ever been printed, and almost every golf teaching aid ever offered for sale on the Golf Channel.

Recently I read a fascinating book by two female golf pros, Pia Nilsson and Lynn Morrow. The book is called Golf 54.

It’s basic premise is that most golfers have birdied every hole on their golf course at some time in their golfing lives, and so it’s the authors’ premise that everyone should be capable of physically shooting a round of 54—an unheard of 18 under par!

Nilsson and Morrow say what prevents us from doing so is our mental approach—our inability to focus on what needs to be done on each and every shot we play. Their motto is “Every shot must have a purpose!”

Now, if you head out to Phoenix, Arizona to attend one of their 2 day

seminars at a cost of \$3000 dollars, they'll give you a very unique training aid.

It's not some \$500 driver with a shaft that folds in two if you swing it wrong, or some straight jacket to ensure you have the perfect take away, or some other high tech contraption designed to pull you wallet out of your pocket and call that on-screen number to finally master the game of golf!

NO! It's a 36" piece of string!

What they tell you to do is to put the string on the ground, and then tee your ball up on the other side of the string. While you're contemplating your shot on the other side of the string they tell you that you're in the "think box", but once you've committed to the shot—and only then—are you allowed to cross that humble piece of string lying on the ground between you and your golf ball—to cross over that "fence" you've erected on the ground before you—to make your shot.

That simple piece of string lying on the ground is the commitment fence line—a symbolic demarcation point between the mental aspect of the game and the physical act of hitting the ball.

Students who take their "Golf 54 Course" claim to have had almost immediate improvement in their golfing scores. Amazing, isn't it, how that simple act of placing a piece of string on the ground as a fence line can be such a powerful teaching tool.

There's a wonderful story from the Second World War, of two French Resistance Fighters who brought the body of a fallen comrade to the door of a church on a dark and foggy night to ask permission to bury their dead friend in the church cemetery.

The priest who answered the knock at the door asked if the comrade had been baptized by the Catholic Church, and when the two pall

bearers said they had no way of knowing whether he had ever been baptized, the priest informed them that the rules of the Church prevented him from giving them permission to bury their friend within the consecrated grounds of the church cemetery, as only those who have been baptized can be buried on the sacred grounds.

He offered as a suggestion that they could bury the dead soldier just outside the fence line.

The Resistance Fighters could tell from the Priest's manner that there was not going to be any bending of the rules of the church regarding who could be buried on the sacred ground, so they picked up the body and headed out to a place just beyond the cemetery's fence line and dug the shallow grave into which they placed their fallen comrade.

In the morning they returned, and walked all around the cemetery but they could not find the freshly dug grave that they *knew* they'd dug only hours before in the foggy darkness. They walked around the fence line time and time again in disbelief, when suddenly they looked up and saw the priest walking towards them.

They blurted out: "Father do you remember us from last night? We brought a dead comrade here to be buried in the cemetery and when you refused us permission we know that we buried his body just beyond the fence—but today—in daylight—we cannot find the grave along the fence line."

The priest nodded and then quietly said. "Yes, I remember. But after you left I started to think about what I had said, and I realized that this was not what God wanted me to do, so after you left I came out—and moved out the fence so that the grave you dug would be inside the grounds of the cemetery!"

That old priest felt God's nudging. He knew that what he had said was

wrong , and so to correct his failings, he came out in the night and *moved out the fences!*

Isn't that what God is always encouraging us to do? In our own lives and in our work as faithful followers of Christ in this congregation?

Have you ever felt that gnawing feeling in your stomach when you want erect fences in your own lives—when we just want to comfortably and safely hunker down against the outside world—but then the Holy Spirit starts to blow around you—and then through you—implore you to move out the fences which are limiting your life and your potential.

Isn't that the message that Jesus was teaching his Disciples in their fishing boat? He was showing them that if they stayed with the tried and true methods of their past, they were doomed to failure, but because they were open to Jesus' suggestion to try something different—to move out the figurative fence that was limiting their catch—their past practices and beliefs—that they would meet with great success!

I'm not sure I would have been any different than those disciples thousands of years ago. I probably would have been the guy in the boat yelling back to the carpenter on the shoreline telling him "Listen, Buddy, I'm a professional fisherman and I know how to fish, and if I'm not catching them, they're not here to be caught! So keep your nose out of my business!"

And I would have been the exhausted fisherman who would have come back to shore, shaking my head at the wasted and fruitless time I'd spent the night before.

This past spring I attended the funeral for a long-time family friend who had died suddenly from an accidental fall. She was only 63 years old, and had a very successful career as an educator—first as a high school teacher, then principal, then a school Superintendent. When she retired

she as a consultant to the Ministry of Education, and then as Special Assistant to the Director of the Toronto District School Board. She was, by anyone's definition, a highly effective educator and leader.

At her funeral service, speaker after speaker recounted their personal stories on how she had significantly impacted their lives—how she had empowered them, both as teachers and as individuals. One of the speakers said that her guiding principle as an educational leader was:

“If it's pedagogically sound, it's administratively doable.”

Those words instantly struck me for the sense of empowerment that must have given to all who worked with her.

At the reception following the service I was surprised to run into a fellow with whom I play hockey. I didn't realize that he had any connection with my late friend, so when I asked him what that connection was, he told me he had been her vice-principal at one of the schools at which she had been the principal. He quickly added that when she was first appointed she came to a school that it was like a giant ocean liner stuck on a reef. But her vice-principal said that with her empowering leadership style the ship was soon afloat and sailing in the right direction.

Her axiom “If it's pedagogically sound, it's administratively doable” addressed the “fences” which prevented her colleagues from becoming the educators they were capable of being and empowered them to effect change. It allowed them to *move out the fences* in their lives.

If we changed just a few of words in that axiom, we'd have a pretty good guiding principle for any congregation. If we said instead, “If a vision for this congregation is Christ-driven, then God will give us the resources to achieve it.” Not only would it move out the fences—it could move mountains!

As you sit here today I'm sure each of you can recount instances in your own lives, or in the life of this congregation where you sensed that there were *fences* which you had erected, or you sensed others had erected around you which prevented you from achieving your true potential, as individuals, or as faithful followers of Christ, here at Runnymede United.

But just like Jesus' suggestion to the fishermen to throw their nets off the right side of the boat at first glance didn't seem, at first glance, to make much *sense* to the fishermen, so too sometimes the urgings God whispers in our ears to change our past ways, at first glance, don't appear to make much sense.

But sometimes we need to be willing to listen to each other. We need to stay silent and listen for the rustle of the Holy Spirit as it moves amongst us, as we think about all the potential this congregation has to effect the lives of those around you here in West Toronto.

The great American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote that "to reach the port of heaven we must sail sometimes with the wind, and sometimes against it—but we *must* sail, and not drift, and never be at anchor."

Sometimes we need to listen to God's call in our lives *to move out the fences* that limit our potential as individuals and collectively as a congregation.

We need to understand that you can't cross a chasm with short steps. Sometimes you have to make a giant leap! Sometimes we need to take one giant leap of faith in order to move on to achieve our full potential!

If you'll go back through your congregational history I'll bet you'll find the same willingness to move out the fences gave birth to each stage of

our development.

That same willingness to move out the fences is what God asks of us each and every day of our lives.

In our personal relationships.

In our faith journeys.

God wants us to be constantly challenging the barriers we've set around ourselves that prevent us from being the person He wants us to be.

There's a story about one of the great European composers who wrote a very difficult piece of music and handed it to the musicians in the orchestra and asked them to play it.

The musicians were soon totally frustrated by the composition—they called it an impossible piece of music to play. They called the composer to come before them and explained their frustration with his piece of work.

He said "I know it's a very difficult piece of music--but the sound I really wanted to hear was the sound of someone trying."

Sometimes we think God is like that. He seems to have written a composition for our lives that seems impossible to carry out—but we have to understand that what he really wants is to see us *trying*.

He wants to see if we're listening to his encouragement to constantly—*move out the fences* in our lives.

Amen

To God be all the honour
all the glory
and all the praise.