

Not long after the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he made a visit back to his hometown, Nazareth. By then, rumors about him were already circulating. He had drawn some good crowds along the way. He was reported to have brought about some amazing healings. Thus his return was causing quite a stir. Finally, it appeared, someone from their little town of Nazareth showed signs of becoming famous. He was asked by the local rabbi to read the scripture in synagogue that Sabbath, and invited to say a few words. There was a good crowd. The scripture for the day was from Isaiah and it said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." When he finished reading those verses, he went on to say, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

At this, it says, there was a general stirring and murmuring among the people. You can imagine what it would have been. His mom whispering to his father that she wished Jesus wouldn't come on quite so strong here among old friends and neighbors. The man who lived next door while he was growing up – whose always-perfect lawn Jesus used as a shortcut – mutters to his wife that Jesus had always been too big for his tunic. A high school buddy whispers, "Now look who thinks he's a prophet!" His ninth grade teacher observes, under her breath, that his grammar had certainly improved, as well as his complexion. The woman who never quite got over her teen-age crush on him, murmurs, "Isn't he just wonderful." (The Bible doesn't say all of that, but it would have been typical.)

Specifically mentioned in the Bible was their strong expectation that Jesus should do some miracles for them here in Nazareth, his hometown – do for them the kinds of things he had done in other places. "Jesus, there's a lot to be done right here in your old community. We know that you have the power. We certainly hope we can count on you to put first, the problems, the needs and illnesses of your family and friends. After all, Jesus, charity begins at home." When Jesus tells them that, no, he won't be doing that; that dispensing miracles isn't his purpose on earth, they're shocked, then furious, and finally become murderous in their rage toward him. They were ready to lynch him. Jesus had to leave town very quickly.

Having gone so badly, that visit to his hometown would have been an easy incident for the writer of the Gospel of Matthew conveniently to forget. This spectacle of Jesus' old neighbors and acquaintances in Nazareth, running him out of town upon discovering that he wasn't going to do what they thought they had a right to expect, isn't a pretty one. It is, though, a very important story in that it reveals that even Jesus had to have firm boundaries on his life – especially so with those who assumed that they had a special claim on his time, his attention, and his help.

You recognize the dilemma, don't you? "How DARE he not do all in his power to meet the expectations of parents, siblings, old friends, those who know him, love him, presumably want the best for him; who (in this case) were part of his nurture in the past?" Doesn't that entitle them to a piece of him?" "Jesus, your father and I have put together a list of a couple of dozen friends here in Nazareth who need healing and help, ones who you really must go see while you're in town. They will never understand if you don't."

Jesus, though, who had a distinctly different vision of what his purpose was – of how he needed to spend himself -- apparently said a very firm "no." That would have been difficult, even for him. It's difficult for most people. Some, in fact, can't handle it at all. The possibility of disappointing, frustrating, much less infuriating anyone close to them, is so daunting that they choose to maintain no boundaries. They feel compelled to adapt themselves to the expectations of others, performing whatever duties and obligations friends and family have for them. In addition to the standard complexities of life, he or she ends up being "on call" to accommodate whatever are other persons' wishes, whims and hopes. It's believed that there is no choice.

"They expect it of me. There's no way I can get out of doing it." "He'd be furious for weeks if I didn't consent on this. I couldn't stand that. Why make him angry when it's easier just to go along with it." "You don't seem to understand. My mother would die of shock and disappointment if she ever found out how much I disagree with her regarding this." "Look, he needs me. He said so. Obviously I have no choice. I have to do it for him!" Or if Jesus were the one thinking this way it might have been, "Hey, those folks here are my parents, my brothers, my neighbors, my old babysitter and school buddies. What kind of person would I be if I knowingly disappointed them?" That sense of "oughtness" and of "unquestionable-and-total-obligation" can be very compelling, even when we half-recognize that the incursions being made into our choices, our conscience, and our personal priorities are inappropriate.

What makes it so difficult to set firm boundaries in one's life is that doing so can feel unloving while allowing others to trespass can feel quite virtuous. "It's because I care so much about their feelings." "I have a duty to defer to her because of things she's done for me in the past." "I just do whatever he expects of me because I know he is wiser than I am and only wants the best for me." Do you see? It's easy to browbeat oneself into believing that virtues like humility, respect, sensitivity, and peacekeeping demand that one allow other persons to have free access to convictions, choices, and priorities. Nevertheless, it's still trespassing.

As caring and empathetic persons, we'll undoubtedly choose to do all manner of things that we know or hope will be a source of joy or reassurance to other persons about whom we care. The point is, though, that it's a choice, not a "built-in" obligation. The moment that there surfaces the sense that "there is no choice in this because "she expects," he won't understand," "they will be disappointed," it

indicates that encroachment is going on, into our selfhood, into the core of us where we are centers of decision, and where, as sons and daughters of God, we're supposed to be taking full responsibility for our values, our priorities, and our integrity.

One of the replies to that will be, "Yes, but in this case this can't be helped because Mom is the way she is, or because Jenny is such a needy person, or because Norman's anger is so terrible." No, that doesn't excuse it either. The often-difficult-to-face-truth is that Mom is the way she is, and that Jenny comes across so abjectly needy, and that Norman throws such tantrums, because it works. It has become, in effect, their ticket to cross yours or my boundaries.

Jill Robinson wrote a description of her relationship with her mother that reverberates of some of this. She said, "We talk of the expectations parents have for our children. Let me tell you about the ones that I had for my mother. She should give me her full attention, but leave me alone except when I needed her, and then she was to be there instinctively. If my mother had troubles, I wasn't to hear about them although she was to listen endlessly to mine, and to offer only pleasing advice. She was to understand that all of my troubles could be traced to her, and yet she wasn't to feel guilty, because that would make me feel uncomfortable. She was to keep herself attractive, but to age in an acceptable manner so that I would not feel she was in competition."

She doesn't say whether her mother met those expectations. If, indeed, Ms. Robinson's mother attempted to be all of that, she was a prime example of this problem. If she were one who was desperate to be needed, or to be liked, or to seem relevant to her daughter, she could easily have done what is so common -- relinquish the boundaries: integrity, self-respect, and ultimately, her credibility. In accepting, absorbing, and accommodating, while always remaining upbeat and agreeable, she would have been submitting to a subtle but very real kind of abuse of her spirit.

One of the great lines in the children's story, "The Wizard of Oz," is near the climax of the story. You'll recall that with the highest of expectations, Dorothy, the cowardly lion, the tin man and scarecrow, fought their way to the palace of the awesome Wizard of Oz. Their driving assumption was that he could and would solve each of their problems for them. As it turned out, though, a piece of screening, by chance, falls over and reveals that the wizard is a very ordinary, small, late-middle-age man, frantically turning dials and pulling levers to create all of the daunting and intimidating special effects.

Discovering this all-too-ordinary person instead of the bono fide wizard they wanted and needed, Dorothy is furious and frustrated, screaming at him, "You are a very bad man!" But the man meekly protests, "No my dear. Actually, I am a good man, but I'm a very bad wizard." Just so. That's finally the truth about that temptation to try to be what everyone needs and expects. As that would-be wizard said to Dorothy and her expectant friends, one can be a very good person with every good intention, but a bad wizard; that is, not capable of coming to everyone's rescue, not succeed in always "making it better"

when someone is unhappy, and not, to good effect, taking up the slack, paying for it, or absorbing the blows.

The principle here is that there has to be a solid, well-maintained, clear decisive center to you and me or we ultimately will not be of much use to ourselves NOR will we be a coherent source of light, support, strength or real help to anyone else. That center of you and me has to be formed and maintained by each one of us, with the help of God. The boundaries will be set differently for different persons, but the boundaries DO need to be our own, be firm ones and kept intact. They will pertain to what it takes to keep the soul of you, in particular, in good shape. They may have to do with the need for solitude, for example, or maybe your level of autonomy of some sort, or for a kind of routine or discipline that you, in particular, need to have intact. It can appropriately include your being the one who finally decides whether you quit something or take something on, quite apart from who approves or disapproves. Your right to reverse your thinking, to try on other ways of looking at life or the world are a part of it, as is yours or my right not to have to explain ourselves or have to apologize for every expectation of us that was unfulfilled. Whatever boundaries it takes to maintain you and me as unique centers of life, of spirit, of joy, of love, of intentions and decision, is not only okay, it's a responsibility.

And don't let anyone tell you that doing so is unchristian. For all that Jesus did to heal, comfort, inspire and help, it tells, not only of his disappointing those hometown folk, but of his refusing to interrupt what he needed to be doing because, for example, his mother and brother showed up. He broke off contact with crowds of people, when he needed to, to go off by himself, leaving people in the crowd still unhelpt. He clearly disappointed his friends, Martha and Mary, by not arriving when and as they expected when their brother became ill. None of this, certainly, was insensitivity or obliviousness. It was because he took more seriously than do some of us, the need to manage his living and giving, rather than be handled by it.

Is keeping healthy boundaries in life difficult? Absolutely. But it's terribly important. To spend one's life never quite being who he is, because of being so used up in trying desperately to be what others feel entitled to demand, may look unselfish on the surface, but it's a distortion of goodness. To live feeling that one must postpone life-restoring joys, personal fulfillment and general well-being, until all duties and responsibilities are seen to, is to remain permanently joyless, exhausted, and unfulfilled. That's a form of self-neglect that eventually destroys a person's effectiveness.

It comes down to this: in this life of Jesus, unmistakably we are called to be God's sons and daughters, co-creators with God, flesh and blood instances of God's presence working in our world. To end up less than that, to become, as sometimes turns out, obsequious puppets, ingratiating errand boys, or in any other sense, ones who have relinquished authority over their own living, is to have profoundly, sacrilegiously lost one's sacred calling.