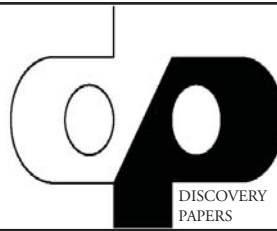


WHAT LIES BEYOND THE FENCE

*SERIES: FROM BUMPER CARS TO CARNIVAL
SWINGS*



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Galatians 3:1-4:31
4th Message
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Not many of you will know the name Adam Schleichkorn. For a long time, nobody knew his name. He was just a regular guy who lived in Huntington, New York. Then he made a video, posted it on Youtube, and a few weeks later, over 70,000 people had seen his video. People starting imitating his idea. Soon he was being interviewed by Fox News, 20/20, and the New York Times. His was one of the first Youtube videos to make it to the mainstream media. What was his clip about? Well, he called it “Fence Plowing.” It’s a simple idea. Run at full speed toward a fence and plow yourself through it. You have to admit that the concept has some kind of basic appeal—bursting through a fence, feeling it break under your weight, and coming out on the other side. I don’t think I’m quite up to trying it myself, but I can understand why it might be appealing.

I wanted us to think about this, to put this picture of “fence plowing” before us because we’ve been talking about fences around here. We’re in the middle of a series reading through the book of Galatians. What we’ve seen in this book is Paul writing a letter to young churches in the region of Galatia. He’s trying to convince the Gentiles in these churches not to get circumcised. He trying to convince them that they don’t have to become Jewish in order to be part of God’s people. The title for our series is “From Bumper Cars to Carnival Swings.” We’ve talked about how, apart from Christ, people are forced to live like bumper cars, figuring out who they are based on how they stack up against each other. But Christ opens up the way for us to live like carnival swings. We are arranged under God and can relate to each other not in competition but in love.

Paul is trying to talk the Gentiles out of conforming to the Jewish Law. Last week we said that the law was a fence. It protected God’s people. And it prepared them for the time when they wouldn’t need it anymore. Today we’re going to continue what we started last week. We’re looking at chapters 3 and 4 together and trying to get the main idea. I suggested that the main point of this section in Paul’s letter is that the law prepared God’s people for the arrival of Christ. It was like a temporary fence that was necessary for a time but has been taken down by Christ. Last week we talked about how we feel safe with fences—fences between us and God and fences between us and other people. My encouragement last week was not to live behind your fences.

But this week, we want to focus on the other side. If the law prepared us for something, what is it that we have been prepared for? What lies beyond the fence? What does life look like when you live it without any fences? This morning we’re going to make Adam Schleichkorn proud. We’re

going to do some fence plowing of our own. Last week I asked you not to live behind your fences. This week I’m asking you to live beyond them. Live beyond the fence.

Look beyond the fence

But if we’re going to live beyond the fence, we have to start by being willing to look beyond it. Many of us are doomed from the start because we have forgotten that there is something more. Here’s a question to think about: what do alcohol, sex, sunsets, and music have in common? Well, each of these things is pleasurable in and of itself. But each of them also awaken something in us that yearns for something more. They connect us to something deeper, something within us that longs for something more. There is this kind of innate promise that we are all aware of, this kind of call within our hearts toward living a full life. And certain things awaken this call. They nurture it. They help convince us of the reality of this sense, this longing we have.

C.S. Lewis wrote a lot about this desire. He borrowed a German word to describe it: *Sehnsucht*. The word is literally translated “longing,” but it is one of those words that doesn’t translate well into another language because it means so much more than a simple idea. He calls it the “inconsolable longing” in the human heart for “we know not what.”¹ This is what Shakespeare was referring to when he wrote, “I have immortal longings in me.”² One of the aspects of this longing according to Lewis is that it is something that is so personal within each one of us that we don’t even think to communicate it to anyone else. It doesn’t occur to us that anyone else would know what we are talking about. Because of the intensity and vagueness of the feeling, we can’t imagine it might be a shared experience.

I think Paul awakens this desire when he talks about the promise that God made to Abraham. Could it be that this promise, made millennia ago, is part of this longing that we feel? Listen to how Paul describes the promise in Gal 3:6-9 as I read from my own interpretive translation.

Think about Abraham for a minute. He believed what God told him was true and so God was pleased with him. So you know that all you have to do is believe what God tells you and you can be a part of the community of God’s people that began with Abraham. The Scripture even told us beforehand that God would welcome the Gentiles into his kingdom through faith. God told Abraham the gospel before we ever heard about it: “People from every background will be welcomed into God’s community by responding to Abraham’s descendent.” Simply

by believing God in the same way that Abraham did, the Gentiles would be welcomed into the community founded by Abraham, the original believer in God.

So Paul says that God gave Abraham a promise. God's promise was that He was forming a people, and He was beginning with Abraham. If you look at the Bible as a narrative, this is where the real action of the Bible begins. This promise is what gets worked out in the whole rest of the Scripture. And you don't see the whole fulfillment until you get to the end of the Bible. What are the details of this promise? People from every background would be welcomed into God's community. The NIV reads "all nations will be blessed." Listen to how this promise eventually comes to its complete fulfillment in Revelation 7:9-10: "there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" People from every background are being welcomed into God's community.

This promise, this desire, this longing is connected to the questions we've been asking the whole time that we've been studying the book of Galatians. "Where do I fit?" "Where do I belong?" What we see is that this longing leads us to relationship. What we long for is belonging. What we long for is a community. I think that a significant portion of this "something more" that we're only dimly aware of is a place where we belong.

I grew up watching the TV show Cheers. I still get goose bumps when I watch old reruns and hear the theme song playing at the beginning of the show. "You wanna go where people know. People are all the same. You wanna go where everybody knows your name." This longing is about belonging. The "something more" that we long for has to do with each other. The phrase used repeatedly in the Old Testament can be found in Leviticus 26:12, "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people." A place where everybody knows your name. God being our God and us being His people. Sexual longing. Desire for fulfillment. It's all part of this same thing. It's all Sehnsucht: the desire to look beyond the fence.

What had happened for the Jews was that they forgot about the promise. Paul describes how God gave them the law after He gave them this promise. The law was a fence that was meant to protect them until they could really experience the reality of this promise fulfilled. And the time had come in the course of history for this promise to be realized. Christ fulfills this promise.

Christ opens the door to something more. Christ is the original fence-plower. He belonged in God's family. He was God's only son. And yet He accepted the rejection, humiliation, and punishment of one who didn't belong. All of God's anger that should have been justifiably expressed toward us for violating our relationship with God was spent on Christ. The NIV says, "he became the

curse." He felt God's anger. So we don't need the law to protect us anymore. He broke through the fence. And he invites us to live beyond the fence by believing in Him. But the Jews had forgotten about the promise; all they remembered was the Law. They forgot that the promise was before the Law and the Law was temporary.

So if we're going to live beyond the fence, we have to start by remembering to look beyond the fence. We have to remember that there is something more. Churches aren't always that good at talking about desire. Our experience is that desire often gets us in trouble, and so we tend to be kind of wary about it. Talking too much about our longing can make us uncomfortable. But this is a terrible mistake. We need to be talking about desire here because we know where that desire points. We need to remember the promise because we know the one who fulfills the promise. But sometimes we just forget that there is anything else on the other side of the fence. Or we convince ourselves that it is just a childish myth. We fall into complacency and just accept all the fences in our lives as inevitable.

Pink Floyd has a song which describes this. Listen to the lyrics:

*When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse,
Out of the corner of my eye.
I turned to look but it was gone.
I cannot put my finger on it now.
The child is grown, the dream is gone.
I have become comfortably numb.³*

Have you become comfortably numb behind your fences? Have you forgotten about the promise? The Christian life is about living in the midst of desire. We live in between the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise and the ultimate fulfillment. So this longing is going to be a major part of our experience until Christ returns. That's why I'm so excited about all the artistic stuff that is going on around PBC. Art has a unique ability to remind us of this desire and to connect us with it. And it's critical that we live in that place between desire and fulfillment.

What reminds you that there is something more? Is it art? Or music? Or being outdoors? Pay attention to your longing. Don't forget about the promise like the Jews did. Before you can live beyond your fence, you need to look beyond it. Look beyond your fence.

You have a Father

Now that we know of the existence of the promise and we know the one who fulfills it, we can ask how to get there. How does Christ invite us to live beyond the fence? The first way is by breaking down the fence between us and God. Remember, Christ fulfills

the promise that God made to Abraham. This promise involved relationship. It involved some kind of intimacy between God Himself and His people. What Christ has done is simple enough to say in a single sentence but rich enough to take a lifetime to understand. Christ reintroduces us to our Father. You have a Father.

Within that one statement is a whole world of meaning. Christ restores the relationship with God that was fractured by sin and rebellion. The Father's anger is focused on Christ, and we are free to experience an intimate relationship with the creator of the universe. But that's a pretty scary thing. It's a lot easier to have a cordial but distant relationship with God, but that's not what the gospel invites us into. The gospel proclaims to you that you have a Father.

Listen to my translation of 4:3-7 where Paul tries to explain this.

This is the way it is with us and the law. When we were underage, we were under the authority of simple laws and principles which helped us understand how the world worked. But when the time was right, God sent his son into the world. He was born just like we were, under the authority of the same principles that we were under. But this was so that he could free us from those principles. Then God could finalize the process of declaring us to be His children. So now we are real sons and daughters. And it was all made possible by the fact that God sent the spirit of His son to live within us so that God saw us as His sons and daughters too. That gives us the amazing privilege of turning to God and saying, "Daddy, my Father." So we aren't slaves anymore. Now we're sons and daughters. And since we are full-fledged children, we can finally share in the inheritance that God promised so long ago.

You have a Father. The image that Paul uses here is one of adoption. All of his language regarding our relationship with God is adoption language. It describes this process whereby someone who at one point wasn't a child of the Father becomes a child of the Father. That's adoption. One of the neat things about this community is that we have quite a few children among us that were adopted by their parents. In a way, this gives them a special insight into this imagery that is so commonly used for our relationship with God. We can learn something from them.

Adoption was actually a very common practice in Roman culture at the time that Galatians was written. One of the primary reasons for its popularity was that it enabled someone to choose his heir. They had no guarantee if the children naturally born to them would be worthy of their inheritance or political authority. So it was very common for Roman rulers and wealthy citizens to adopt people as a means of choosing who would be heir to their power and wealth. One of the most famous examples of this was Augustus Caesar, who was the Roman Emperor when Jesus was born. He was adopted by Julius Caesar so

that Julius could choose his heir. And Augustus adopted his heir, as well.

Stop and think about that for a moment. God has adopted you as a child because he wanted to choose who would receive his inheritance. Let that sink in. He wanted to choose you. God has adopted you as His child so that you can receive His inheritance. This is why it was so important for the Jews to realize that they became part of God's people through faith as well. They could argue that they were born as children of God. They were his natural children. But they had forfeited that status through sin and rebellion, both individually and as a people. So even the Jews who believed in Christ were adopted into God's family. God chose them so they could receive his inheritance. God chose them to be children.

So the gospel invites us to see God as our dad. This can be hard for some of you whose relationship with your dad is painful or non-existent. But even your pain and longing for what you wish your father had been can point you to what you have in God as your father. Daddy is a powerful word. I remember the first day that my oldest daughter ran to me when I came home and said, "Daddy, I missed you." At that point, I was done. I was giving her the car keys, the credit card, whatever she wanted. Can you imagine that this is the kind of relationship we have with the creator of the universe? We can call him "daddy?"

Living beyond our fence means living as a child of the father. Living in the wide open space of a dynamic relationship between father and child. Think about a fence again for a moment. A fence leaves you two options. Either you stay on this side of the fence or you move to the other side. When I'm looking at a fence I either jump over it or stay where I am. Two options. One or the other. But living beyond the fence means there is a wide open space. Living as a child of the Father means that God wants to have a relationship with you, not to make sure you always know what side of the fence you should be on, but to relate with you. He wants to walk with you, experience life together with you.

I remember a time when I was in college and I had a huge dilemma. My dorm was going on a ski trip one weekend. And the Christian fellowship that I was involved in was going on a retreat the same weekend. I had this huge dilemma over which trip to participate in. On the one hand, the retreat would help me to get to know some Christians and develop my relationship with God. On the other hand, I loved to ski, and the dorm ski trip would be really fun. One of the options sounded spiritual, one of them sounded fun. But that's thinking in fences: this side of the fence or that side of the fence. In the middle of thinking through this decision, I talked to my sister about it and I remember that she asked me the question, "Well, which one do you *want* to go on?" That question fell on me like a brick. I hadn't even been asking that. I hadn't even allowed myself to ask that because all I saw was a fence.

God wants me to live beyond the fence. When I live

as a His child, I don't see a fence. I'm not trying to figure out which side of the fence He wants me to be on. My Father cares about what I want to do. He cares about me, not just the decisions I make. Do you get that? You have a Father that cares about you, not just whether you perform for Him. That means I'm free to crawl into His lap. Or I'm free to throw a fit. I'm free to argue with Him. I'm free to complain. And I'm free to be grateful. Or to praise Him. For me, this can be a really scary place. I feel like lately, God has been calling me out from behind my fences as I make decisions in my family and in ministry. And it seems that if I just focus on Him and try to discern what He's asking me to do, I'm okay. But I'm so easily distracted and frightened by the lack of fences. I feel like Peter walking on the water. As soon as I look around, I start to sink. I'm scared and I need fences. But we don't have to live like that. We have a Father beyond our fences. Let's live as His child.

You have brothers and sisters

However, having God as our Father means more than just having a daddy. It also means becoming part of a family. You have a father, and you have brothers and sisters. In our culture, we think primarily in terms of individual relationships. I have a relationship with my father. I have a relationship with my mother. I have a relationship with each one of you. But the culture in which Paul was writing was a much more community-oriented culture. Family played a larger role. To call someone "daddy" didn't just mean that you had a new relationship with a father. It meant that you were included in that father's family. You may remember in the gospels that some of the Jews talk about having Abraham as their father. They didn't mean they had an individual relationship with Abraham—he was long dead. They meant that they were part of Abraham's family.

When we think about God as our father, it doesn't just mean crawling into his lap and calling him "daddy." We also have a huge family sitting around a crowded table over dinner. As soon as we're adopted by a father, we have new sisters and brothers. We are part of that daddy's family. On the other side of our fence is a father. But on the other side of the fence are also brothers and sisters.

Listen to Galatians 3:26-29 as Paul tries to express this.

Don't you realize that you have all become sons and daughters of God simply by believing in Jesus Christ? For when you got baptized in the name of Christ, you assumed His role as a child of the Father. So now that we are all sons and daughters of the same Father, we're all equal. That means it doesn't matter whether someone is a Jew or a Greek. It doesn't matter whether they are poor or really wealthy. It doesn't matter whether they are a man or a woman. Because we are all equal sons and daughters with Christ Jesus, we are all part of one family and our distinctions no longer define us. So what that means is that if you believe Christ,

then you are part of Abraham's descendants and you inherit the promise that was given to him.

The law prepared us to know each other by protecting us from each other until we could really be freed up to love each other. Christ has plowed through the fence of the law. Now we're free to love each other. We can live as a carnival swing, arranged under God in a new family. And one of the primary qualities about this new family that Paul wants us to understand is that the Galatians are equal amidst their distinctions. They were one amidst their differences.

What was happening in Galatia was that there was a community that was fractured by a significant distinction: Jew and Gentile. In their day, you could hardly find a distinction that was more difficult to overcome. This was one of the biggest. The truth is that living amidst different people gets hard. It gets challenging and you get tired. So what they wanted to do in Galatia was just to remove the distinctions. It's a lot easier to relate to people who are similar to you. So why don't we just all become Jews? If the Gentiles would just get circumcised and become Jewish, then we wouldn't have to deal with all this frustration of learning to relate to someone who is really different from us. In this way, they were trying to remove the distinctions as a way of learning to love each other. Let's just all become the same so we can live as a family.

In contrast, what Paul is saying and has been saying throughout this book is that the gospel has already made you a family. You don't need to remove your differences in order to live like one. Christ has freed you up to love each other and stay different. In the world, where all you can do is figure out who you are by comparing yourself to someone else, to love someone else who is really different from you is virtually impossible. Those differences become ways that you are better or worse than that person. So the way to love someone is to take away those differences. But the gospel offers a better alternative. The gospel offers something more. The gospel of Jesus creates a community where those distinctions continue to exist but cease to be significant. We're still different, but our differences don't define us.

There are two ways to live in a community with fences. The first is to create fenced-off sub-communities. We split up based on our age groups and musical tastes and personal backgrounds. When this happens, you never come across anyone who is different from you. You never have to relate across distinctions. You are protected by your fences. Of course, sometimes it's helpful and very important to meet in a group of similar people. That's why we have a college ministry and a high school ministry and a women's ministry. But part of the goal is always to come together as a church.

The other way we live in communities without fences is by inviting others to come to our side of the fence. This is people coming together and losing all their distinctions. This is the tendency to homogenize: let's all become like each other to make it easier to love each other. This is what

the Galatians were tempted to do: homogenize. And the particular way they were doing it was to make everyone a Jew. Make us all the same. Lose our differences.

Both of these examples are ways to live successfully in a world of fences. Either keep on your side of the fence or invite others over to your side of the fence. But both ways involve fences. That's not our call as Christians. For us, the fences have been plowed down. We are invited into a world of relationships without fences, where we maintain our distinctions but are able to love each other amidst them. Where I can like my type of music and you can like your type of music, but we can worship together. Where I send my kids to public school and you home school your kids and we can appreciate each other's decisions. We want to experience this new community that God has created. We want to be part of a family that hasn't lost its distinctions but has learned, through the gospel, to love each other amidst distinctions.

One of the hardest things about having brothers and sisters is that they are never treated exactly the same. I experienced this as a child. I'm the youngest of three kids, and my life was different than that of my older brother. He had certain privileges that I didn't have and I had certain opportunities that he didn't have. I see the same thing happening for my kids. This is often felt as a terrible injustice. It's true that parents should attempt on some level to equalize the way they treat their children. But to make everything completely identical is impossible. It's a different experience to be oldest or youngest. You can't remove that distinction.

This is true in our community, as well. Older people have a different experience than younger people in this community. Leaders within this community experience things differently. It feels different to be white or Asian or black or Hispanic in this community. But the gospel gives us the freedom to treat each other like brothers and sisters without taking away our differences. I don't mean treat each other like you actually treat your brothers and sisters, because I know how well that often works out. It isn't always pretty. I mean treat each other like brothers and sisters are supposed to treat each other. You have a Father. You have brothers and sisters.

As we move on in the book of Galatians, we're going to spend the rest of the time talking about what this looks like in practice. We have two more weeks where we'll look at the last two chapters of this book. These chapters get really practical about what it looks like to live with brothers and sisters. What do you do when someone hurts you? How does loving each other affect the way you handle your money? How do I grow out of my desire to use people and move towards loving them? That's where this book ends.

That's where Paul has been moving this whole time. How do we really love each other as a family?

Our encouragement today is to live beyond our fence. Remember that image that Adam Schleickhorn gave us of someone running through an old fence. He just bursts through and the fence splinters as he comes out the other side. But in the video, the next guy that tries it demonstrates that fence plowing doesn't always work. He didn't quite make it all the way. Sometimes you get stuck. Sometimes it hurts. And that's where we end up much of the time. We're going to get stuck as we try and do this, and that's okay. Don't give up after your first try. Fence plowing is a disciplined sport. It takes dedication and perseverance. Maybe we'll see it in 2012 at the next Olympics. Who knows?

So live beyond your fences. To do that, you have to remember that there is something more. Don't dismiss your desire. Don't ignore your longing. Let it remind you that there is something beyond our fences. And then start to explore that new land. You have a Father. Don't be afraid of his anger. Go to Him. Trust Him. You have brothers and sisters. Don't try to erase all of the distinctions that we have among us—that's what gives us our rich diversity. Love each other in the midst of the distinctions. We don't need our fences anymore. Christ has plowed them down. Live beyond your fence.

NOTES

¹ *C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy, p. 61*

² *William Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, 5.2*

³ *Pink Floyd, "Comfortably Numb."*