

CROSSING BOUNDARIES, FINDING MYSELF

By Ellie Roscher

Seeking to know others helps us know ourselves. Making friends with people who look, think, and act like me is easy and safe. But boundaries between groups can become hard to permeate. Many groups in high school look very homogeneous. Humans construct boundaries and categories that God does not see.

Crossing boundaries is the work of the gospel, of treating others as we want to be treated. Crossing boundaries gives us a new mirror in which to see ourselves. If we seek out and build relationships with people who don't look, think, and act like us, we can become more interesting. Even more, the act of crossing boundaries helps us clarify our own identity as it challenges us to think about who we are becoming.

For the past three summers, I have traveled to El Salvador with students who are going to be seniors. These students have identified the desire to cross boundaries. One writes in her application:

"I want to go to El Salvador because I just know there is more out there in the world for me to learn. Get me out of the suburbs!"

Beth, senior

Beth wants to get out of the suburbs; others are eager to leave the pressures of the inner city. Often fear of the other keeps us from journeying into the unknown. These seniors intentionally seek to see other people, places, and cultures, the wider world.

Upon arriving in El Salvador, the students hear the story of Oscar Romero, who grew up loving books and liturgy and studied in Rome to become a priest. When he was named archbishop, Romero asked a friend how to use his new position and power. “Go and see your people,” the friend replied. The new archbishop went to see for himself how most of the Salvadorans lived rather than stay among rich friends in San Salvador, the capital and cathedral city. He crossed boundaries, which began his conversion into a pastor of the people.

When two disciples of John the Baptist seek out Jesus, he asks what they are looking for and invites them to his house, “Come and see.” Jesus invites them to venture outside of themselves and learn by experience. The disciples come, see, stay all day, and tell others what they find, “Jesus is the messiah” (John 1.35-42). God is constantly inviting us to “Come and see.” Life and God are in a perpetual state of invitation. Are we brave enough to accept? Like Archbishop Romero, these students bravely go and see for themselves what life is like in a different country.

**“We only live a six hour plane flight away, but a world apart.
Yet, we will be their family in a few days.”**

Akoni, senior

The group makes a three-day home stay in rural San Vicente, El Salvador. Two by two, the students go and stay with families. They live in homes of tin with dirt floors, take bucket showers, and use dirty latrines. Chickens run

around at their feet as they help make tortillas in the scorching sun. They cross barriers of age, language, country, race, and socio-economic class. These are all human-made boundaries, and when students intentionally cross them, the gospel happens. By the end of the third day, the Salvadorans have welcomed the seniors in as family and changed their lives.

“They are not fine. And we know that now. There are actually people out there in poverty. It is not just an issue; these are people we know and love.

Morgan, senior

“Saying goodbye is not enough. There is a hole in my heart. What am I supposed to do now? I feel like I left them.”

Ellie, senior

“The random hospitality is ridiculously amazing.”

Akoni, senior

“You forever have a friend in El Salvador, and I have two friends in Minnesota.”

Romero, house dad from Santa Cruz

“I’m going to have culture shock in my own home. We have been trapped in this box and now we are free.”

Morgan, senior

During the home stay in El Salvador, the students do identity work without even knowing it. They are realizing things about the human spirit. They are seeing themselves in the eyes of the other. They come back home more aware of who they are and what the wider world looks like. They know how powerful they are. They believe that love is stronger than any human-made boundary.

Crossing country boundaries is exciting and extreme, but boundaries exist everywhere to be crossed. Gender, race, religion, sexuality, and socio-economic class boundaries exist in every school. Sometimes the boundaries in front of our faces are most difficult to cross.

The students who go to El Salvador are not friends before the trip. As I watch my students cross cultural barriers, I also watch them cross lunchroom table barriers as they spent time together and share. A basketball star realizes she has a theatre diva judged all wrong. A shy guy says something profound during reflection that makes everyone take a second look. The class clown breaks down in tears at the massacre site of four Jesuits, their cook, and her daughter. Boundaries start to fade away, and the students realize the power of high school judgment and gossip. The group becomes a family and brings what they learned back into the hallways at school. Reaching out to the person assigned to sit in the next desk in math class can be just as revolutionary as making a friend from a different socio-economic class at the local soup kitchen where one volunteers.

Crossing boundaries can look like going to a classmate's house for dinner or accepting an invitation to a cultural celebration of an acquaintance. It can mean going to worship in a different neighborhood or faith background, or shopping with a friend of a different race, or watching a movie with someone of a different sexual orientation. The secret is to get into the daily lives of people in our communities, listen to their stories, and share one's own story. Getting to know others erases boundaries.

It is difficult for us to see and name privilege and power in our lives unless we become friends with those who feel marginalized. We tend to set up boundaries so that these friendships never happen. One student may not realize she is rich until she meets someone experiencing poverty. Another may not realize that being heterosexual is a privilege until he realizes that people in the LGBT community don't always feel safe. A white person does not have to think about race, and a man does not have to think about gender as often as a

person who is not in the dominant culture. Where we have societal power, God is calling us to be boundary crossers, to build relationships, and welcome others into the center of things.


“When you are working with people whose basic needs are not being met, life gets real. It is invigorating.”

Mark, teacher

Identifying boundaries that humans make and intentionally crossing them can transform who we are and what we are about. One of the most important boundaries to cross is the one into our own souls. Some people can get so enthusiastic about reaching out to people who are different from them that they forget to ground themselves in who they are. Some people’s boundaries break down in relationships, giving them a chameleon quality. We have to know who we are as selves separate from any relationships in our lives. Many adults cite their loneliest times as important in forming their identities. Finding solitude and being alone create a self-reflective space in which we can differentiate from the other.

“When you get confused and let yourself lose it, you start to know who you are. You find out who you will never be and then you just go and keep trying.”

Mark, teacher



In El Salvador students journal each day. For many the trip is their first long time away from friends and family and from cell phones, ipods, Facebook, and for girls, make-up. They feel a little uncomfortable without air conditioners, Chipotle, and daily routine. This makes the time valuable for feeling the aloneness and thinking about who we really are and what gives our lives meaning.

In our lifelong journeys to discover who God created us to be in our world, we live in a tension

between reaching out across boundaries to others and taking time inside of ourselves to listen to God's voice and ours in dialogue. Our relationships form our identity. We reach out to others. We reach in to our self.

FOR REFLECTION

- How do humans create boundaries? Why? Do you agree that the gospel happens when boundaries are crossed? How does fear keep us from crossing boundaries? Which human-made boundaries are the scariest for you to cross? Why? What is the specific fear? How do masks play into crossing boundaries in high school? What part of you do you check at the door when you come to school?
- Consider Jesus' words: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Mark 12.30-31). How do you see loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving ourselves connected to each other? Which is the hardest for you to do? Which do you need to focus on first so that the other two naturally and joyfully happen? Which love is the easiest? Who is your neighbor?
- Do you have a boundary crossing story? After crossing once, does it get easier to do it again? How is saying yes to invitations to cross boundaries a part of vocation?
- If you are in a position of privilege, who will you never be? How can you have empathy and advocate for people who struggle with things you will never experience? In what areas of your life do you hold societal power? How can you use that power for the work of the gospel?
- How is solitude different from loneliness? Does being alone scare you? Have you had sacred times of solitude that have helped you form your identity?
- Consider Elie Weisel's words: "I swear never to be silent whenever and wherever human lives endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides.

Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere when human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, that place, at that moment, must become the center of the universe.”

● Where have you seen human dignity in danger at your school? In your neighborhood? In our world? How does breaking silence and crossing boundaries bring up issues of privilege and entitlement? Where can we find the courage to move?

A GROUP EXERCISE

Form an inner and outer circle so that the person on the inside faces the person on the outer circle, and each pair is about five feet from the pair to their right and left. A leader decides which of the questions below the pairs will talk about in each round. All commit to both active listening and talking. The group changes pairs after two or three minutes, the inner circle moves, and the new pairs receive a new question.

- What is your family like?
- What is your favorite cultural celebration?
- How is your faith life right now?
- If money was not an issue, with whom and where would you eat lunch today?
- What is the last thing that made you cry?
- What is something you want to accomplish in your life?
- What is one way you are misjudged in high school?

After moving through the questions, discuss how sharing stories and getting to know one another better affects boundaries. In what ways does the group feel boundaries coming down?