

Something There Is That Doesn't Love a Wall

Isaiah 56:1-8; Luke 4:16-30

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 10) 2023

Kyle Childress

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*

-Robert Frost, *Mending Wall*

This morning, I want us to continue our conversation about walls. Why do we have them? What do we do about them? Building walls, drawing lines, setting boundaries seem to be the rage these days. And rage is all too often the operable word – an out-of-control anger and fear.

There was a story this week (Sept. 8) in the *Washington Post* by writer/journalist Rebecca Fishbein called *Everyone is Setting Boundaries. Do They Even Know What It Means?* Fishbein writes that along with psychological insights and truths that have become trendy, words and phrases like “trigger” and “me-time,” the idea of setting boundaries has become very much in vogue. The problem is that these terms easily lose their moorings and become something else entirely. Boundary setting, instead of helping us and others know our limits, acting as guidelines to help us maintain healthy habits and relationships, can be misused. A boundary can become a means of controlling someone else's behavior or making demands or manipulation. It can become a way of shutting down or sticking our head in the sand or denial.

Fishbein asks, “But how do boundaries work? Why do we need them? And how are people getting it wrong?”

The poet Robert Frost asks some of the same questions in his wonderful poem *Mending Wall*, that begins:

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*

The poem is about two neighboring farmers who meet once a year to rebuild the stone wall that marks the boundary between their two farms. The narrator wonders why they do this. Indeed, why do they even need a wall? Neither of them has cows, the narrator has apple trees, and the neighboring farmer has pine trees, as the narrator says, “My apple trees will never get across/And eat the cones under his pines.” His neighbor responds with, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

As a good poet, Frost does not resolve any of this for us. Why does the neighbor persist in saying, “good fences make good neighbors”? While at the same time the narrator persists, “something there is that doesn't love a wall.”

The Bible raises the same questions. The Bible reflects, “something there is that doesn't love a wall,” while at the same time, the notion, “good fences make good neighbors” is also there.

Bear with me while I give you some biblical history. The leadership of the people of Israel have been in exile in Babylon for 50 years. The Babylonian Empire had destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 587 BCE. The leadership of Jerusalem – royalty, priests, leaders, teachers, and so on were

carried away to the city of Babylon. Left behind in the rubble and in the surrounding villages were the common people.

For 50 years, the common people left behind worked hard as best they could at keeping the Law and remembering who God was and who they were. At the same time, the religious-political leadership in exile also worked hard at remembering God and remembering who they were. Meanwhile, Persia took over the old Babylonian empire and the king of Persia sent the Jewish leadership back to Jerusalem and put them in charge as the figurehead government loyal to Persia. The book of Daniel, the end of II Kings, Jeremiah chapters 39-43, Lamentations, II Chronicles, and the beginning of Ezra tell us about the exile and the Jewish return.

So, now the leadership wants to reestablish their control and social status. They believe they know best about how to rebuild the city, rebuild the Temple, and rebuild the faith. Essential to all this is the rebuilding of the walls of the city. The walls provide safety and separation, identity, definition, and clarity for the new regime to rebuild everything.

Biblical scholars point out that the returning leadership were a mixed bag. There were priests who believed their job was to purify the faith and make sure all the people, who've been on their own for 50 years and considered ignorant, now had proper religious leadership. The returning priests alone could properly oversee the rebuilding of the Temple. Then there were the politicians, who worked for Persia, and had the job of exerting colonial control of Judah. Then there were all sorts of land speculators and carpetbaggers with various get-rich schemes mixed in with regular businesspeople trying to establish new businesses. And there were nationalists who saw the chance to make Judah great again. The one thing they all agreed upon was that they were to be in charge and that the poor people who had

been there on their own for the past 50 years were not capable of leading or were not worthy of leading. The common people were looked down upon. They had intermarried with other groups, they had adopted various other non-Jewish practices, and they had become too foreign acting.

As you can guess, there was conflict. So the leadership said, we need to set some boundaries. We need to define Jewish integrity and who has it and who doesn't, who is in and who is out. We need protection from the foreigners who surround us while we straighten out this morass of mixed marriages and unfaithful religion.

The biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah reflect this preoccupation of defining insiders and outsiders. Both books agree that marriage was the central focus for determining Jewish ethnic identity. Nehemiah said if you're already married to a non-Jew then we'll let it stand but from now on, Jews can only marry Jews. Ezra took a more severe stance, saying that if you had married a foreigner, then you must divorce them.

Ezra and Nehemiah both looked to Deuteronomy 23 and Leviticus 21 as the basis for the return to a strict understanding of who was allowed to be Jewish and who was not. Excluded from the assembly of the people of God were foreigners, people with physical disabilities, and those emasculated by sexual physiology or orientation – eunuchs. People were excluded *not on the basis of something they had done* but because of *who they were in their bodies and ethnicity*. Do you hear me on this? Listen again, exclusion was based *not on something they had done* but *who they were* – their race or ethnicity, their sexuality or gender identity, and such.

The book of Nehemiah is focused on the rebuilding of the wall around the city. Both the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are all about the building walls,

mending walls, and setting boundaries. Ezra and Nehemiah would both agree that “good fences make good neighbors,” and both would agree that God’s will is to construct the wall.

Third Isaiah begs to differ. This brief reminder is that the big book we call Isaiah is really composed of three books: Isaiah chapters 1-39 (or First Isaiah) was the eighth century prophet challenging Judah to be faithful to God or else something of the judgement of God would result. Something like invasion and exile. Second Isaiah 40-55 was written to the people in exile, comforting them, giving them hope, and reminding them God was not finished with them. Finally, Third Isaiah 56-66 was addressed to the people once they have returned from exile. Third Isaiah might argue, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” and for Third Isaiah the “Something there” is none other than the Living God, Creator of the Universe, Yahweh.

Third Isaiah does not say there is no need for boundaries. Instead, the boundaries desired by the Living God are boundaries of justice and shalom, of making sure everyone has enough to eat and has a decent and safe place to live. It is the boundary of those who keep the Sabbath – meaning not only they rest and worship God on the Sabbath but that they practice the acceptable year of the Lord, the Jubilee, which is about just economics in which poverty and marginalization are reduced until they are nonexistent. To practice Sabbath and sabbath economics means everyone has enough and no one has too much. As theologian Ched Myers says, “It means that the gifts of the Creator must circulate rather than concentrate” (*Our God is Undocumented*, p. 96).

Third Isaiah begins with these words: “No longer let the foreigners say surely the Lord will separate one from his people. No longer let the eunuch say I

am but a dry tree for thus says the Lord God. ‘The days are coming when the eunuch, who hears my voice and obeys my law and keeps my covenant, I will give him a place in my house, and I will give him a name and it shall be to him as generation and generation and generation of children. Better than sons and daughters it shall be to the eunuch’” (Is. 56: 3-5). Third Isaiah speaks directly and clearly to those and for those who are being excluded and dehumanized. Right here in the same Bible, Deuteronomy 23 and Leviticus 21 says “No!” but Isaiah 56 says that the days are coming when the word of God is “yes.” Ezra and Nehemiah say, “Good fences make good neighbors,” but Third Isaiah says, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

So, what do we do? How do we interpret and decide which word to follow? Do we simply throw up our hands and walk away from the Bible entirely? Surely not! We do what the heart of Christianity has done for centuries, and most assuredly our radical church tradition, sometimes called the Anabaptists, sometimes called the Free Church, and what my old mentor Jim McClendon called “baptist” (lower-case “b”), long advocated: We look to Jesus Christ.

We do not read the Bible as a flat book where every verse carries the same weight of authority as every other verse. Instead, we read the Bible where the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the high points. We start in the Gospels with the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus, then we go from there. Through Jesus Christ we read backwards the Old Testament and read forward through the rest of the New Testament. The Bible interprets the Bible and most supremely, Jesus Christ, interprets the Bible.

According to our reading from Luke 4, Jesus has returned home to Nazareth and since it is the Sabbath, Jesus is in church (more specifically he is in his

hometown synagogue). Luke says this hometown boy who is already making a name for himself as a remarkable rabbi, is the preacher for the day. From what Luke says, Jesus is about to preach his first sermon and he takes the scroll/Bible and opens it to Isaiah chapter 61. His first sermon is from Third Isaiah; indeed, he opens it to what is considered the heart of Third Isaiah. Luke says Jesus read:

“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 set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Luke continues, “And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, *‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’*” (Luke 4:18-21).

Everyone approved. This boy of ours can preach! People were nodding and smiling and saying, “Amen! Preach it!” Jesus was pushing it. His preaching was bold. I mean, he was reading the part about the year of the Lord’s favor, which was the Jubilee (sabbath economics), and saying that all this is no longer about some far-off day in the future. It’s about now! The prophesied day of the Lord when all this will start coming to pass is today!

But then Jesus really pushed it. He began to speak about Elijah being sent by God to the widow of Zarephath, a foreigner, who fed him (v. 25-26). And then he talked about how God used the prophet Elisha to heal Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy. Naaman, too was a foreigner (v. 27). Jesus is challenging the people’s sense of exclusive privilege and supremacy, arguing that God used the two greatest prophets of Israel in working with outsiders, foreigners!

So much for admiring their hometown preacher! Take notice, Victoria (she will preach her inaugural sermon next Sunday), after Jesus' first sermon, these hometown folks turn on him, become enraged, and try to kill him by throwing him off a nearby cliff (v. 28-29).

Using Third Isaiah, Jesus called those people so long ago, and calls us today to faithful covenant-keeping over self-righteous gatekeeping (Ched Myers, p. 105). We are to have boundaries, but the boundaries God calls us to are different. Theologian Greg Jones calls them porous boundaries rooted in Jesus Christ. These are boundaries they help us know who we are and who we are called in Christ to be, but that means they are boundaries always open to each other, open to the other, the outcast, the left-out. When we are rooted in Christ and in Christ's body, we do not need to be threatened by those considered outsiders. Instead, we can open our arms and our lives to them. The porous boundaries God draws are for those who seek to faithfully follow Jesus, act like Jesus, serve like Jesus, embrace like Jesus, and forgive like Jesus. Specifically, what Third Isaiah is talking about contrary to Ezra and Nehemiah, the God we know in Jesus Christ does not build walls to exclude gay and lesbian Christians and construct razor wire fences to reject immigrants.

People build walls in all sorts of ways beyond using bricks and mortar. We build walls of exclusion by banning books and being in denial that racism is at the heart of our White American life and has been for centuries. We shut down Diversity training in our schools and anything else that challenges our exclusivist and narrow perspectives. And just like in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, we tend to want our exclusivist walls when our world is changing, and we want to hunker down and bunker up in fear and anger.

As we learn to root ourselves in Christ and Christ's body, we are no longer threatened by those considered different and we are not afraid of books and ideas. Indeed, instead of banning books and being afraid of different ideas, we can read and think and discuss and be critically minded. Some people, some books, some ideas, and some religion and politics, we can disagree with but not be threatened by them. We learn that God is at work in lots of people, like the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian. That all truth is from God, so we do not fear it.

Roger Williams is a hero of mine. He was surrounded all his life by Puritans who sought to use the Old Testament as a handbook for civil and church government. Sailing from England Williams arrived in Boston in 1630 to serve as a minister. He found himself in the middle of the same thing he was trying to escape, where church and civil authorities used the Old Testament to anoint kings, go to war, burn witches at the stake, and persecute those who disagreed with them.

Williams believed that Jesus Christ is to be central. He is our measuring rod, and the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Christ. Therefore, from Jesus onward government interference in anyone's faith – and it does not matter if that faith be true or false – constituted disobedience to Jesus himself.

The Puritans wanted to execute him but settled on running him off. During the winter of 1635-36 Williams wandered in the New England wilderness finding refuge among the Narragansett indigenous tribes and eventually settled in their country founding a village, and what became a refuge called Providence and later the colony of Rhode Island. Williams started a church which we now know as First Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, the first Baptist church in America. Williams' colony welcomed all sorts of people, including Quakers, who were being hung in Massachusetts Bay Colony, and various other kinds of dissenters,

including Anne Hutchinson, the first female preacher in America. The land he settled on, Williams purchased from the Narragansett – denying the so-called doctrine of discovery, which European Christians had been using since 1493 to seize any and all land owned or populated by non-Christians.

Williams believed in boundaries and walls but different from those found in Boston. He famously called for a “hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.” Williams believed that when the church starts trying to be in charge of the state, it not only hurts the state, but the church is no longer the church. His wall of separation between church and world developed into the wall of separation between church and state and the doctrine of religious liberty.

We need to know our Bible and know our faith. When the modern-day Puritans come to impose their rule based upon their view of the Bible, it is going to take more to resist them than wishful thinking. I want us to know our stuff.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.