

New England poet Robert Frost, of the last century, tells in one of his poems the story of a wall. The wall is low, made out of stones, and it runs along as a fence, dividing his land from his neighbor's land. When we were recently in upstate New York, we drove some rural roads, and as I always do, I admired those quaint stone walls that line roadways and divide fields; they're so much more historic and appealing than our Midwest freeway barrier walls or our chain link fences. The stone wall in Frost's poem, as it turns out, is not actually necessary; the poet's side of the wall is an apple orchard, the neighbor's side of the wall is a grove of pines. There are no farm animals or children being fenced in or out, and Frost notes that neither the apple trees nor the pine trees have the capacity to deliberately make their way into the other person's property. Nonetheless, the wall stands, and each spring, Frost and his neighbor walk along together, each on their side of the stone wall, to replace any of the stones that have fallen out during the winter. This particular spring, the poet is feeling mischievous and rebellious about building a wall he deems unnecessary. He tells his neighbor, "Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was likely to give offense." To which his neighbor replies stubbornly, "Good fences make good neighbors." Very pragmatic viewpoint, perhaps a little cynical, though also true, right? "Good fences make good neighbors." Our daughter and son-in-law recently moved into a house in Blaine and one of the first things they did was to put up a chain-link fence to keep their large dog from roaming into their neighbor's yard. I'm guessing their neighbors would agree with the man in our poem that "good fences make good neighbors." They set clear boundaries; they protect our privacy and our property. We get that.

We read about walls in our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson, Paul's letter to the Ephesians, though, and Paul is going to have a little different take on walls. Paul wrote, "For Christ is our peace and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility." So, there may be a contrast between our feeling about walls and *Christ's* feelings about walls, as expressed through St. Paul's words. We like walls, we build walls; Christ doesn't think so much of walls, he breaks them down. It might seem, in fact, as though we and Christ are at cross-purposes when it comes to walls; and maybe we are.

We might think a bit about walls in our world. There was the Great Wall of China, built to keep out invaders, way back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> C. BC. There were medieval walled towns, like Rothenberg, Germany, which we once got to visit, where again, a wall was built to protect the citizenry from adversarial forces. Forts built in our nation during frontier days featured walls to keep out trouble. In more recent years, there was the infamous Berlin wall, dividing East and West Germany, with their differing ideologies and politics. We have walls along some of our national borders in order to prevent unwanted entries into the country. Walls represent our perception, accurate or not, that we are in danger from hostile forces and must act to protect ourselves.

Paul very likely had a wall much closer to home in mind as he wrote this letter. As a good Jew, Paul would have been very familiar with the great temple in Jerusalem. The temple was a grand, huge structure in Greco-Roman style, built of massive stones, and it included a court for Jewish males, a court for Jewish females, and a court for Gentiles---a Gentile being anyone who was not Jewish. The courts were divided by walls. Archeological studies reveal a stone sign on the walls which proclaimed that any Gentile entering the inner court of the Jewish men could suffer the penalty of death. Evidently the Jews took their walls seriously. They divided women from men, Gentiles from Jews. *These* were likely the dividing walls of hostility Paul pictured in his mind; the Jewish temple and walls came to symbolize the barriers erected because of the hostility between different groups of people. Which stands in opposition to the original purpose of the original Temple, envisioned by King David and built by his son, King Solomon, about 1000 years earlier—it was intended to be a house of prayer for *all* peoples. When we see how that Temple became instead a symbol of division, it's really quite ironic and sad. In fact, the Holy Land itself, including the structure that now stands in place of that Temple, is an entire *land* of walls, division, and hostility, exactly the opposite of the original intent of both the Temple and the Holy Land. Not at all what God had in mind, nor King David, who brought Israel together, for that matter.

If we make a bit of a segue way between our lesson from Ephesians and our Psalm for this morning, you'll have noticed that we heard read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, one of the most beautiful and beloved pieces of sacred poetry in all the world. And it was written by this same King David, who envisioned a different kind of Temple

than what eventually transpired. Notice how this Psalm fits so perfectly within the setting of our worship outdoors---this is an open air psalm, a nature lover's psalm. One way to summarize the content is remember three "P"s---within the Psalm we learn that God will give us protection, provision, and presence. We find the protection even within a valley of dark shadows, even when facing death; we do not fear. And the reason for that is the presence of God---"I fear no evil, for You are with me." The provision is stated succinctly early on: "I shall not want". God provides enough for our needs. And later in the Psalm, God prepares a table before us, including overflowing cups and oil for anointing. Protection, Presence, and Provision within this psalm. And what don't we find here? No walls. There are still waters, green pastures, pathways, valleys, but no walls. This heart-felt psalm of prayer and gratitude from David is for anyone and everyone, just like the peace and goodness of God are for anyone and everyone---no walls. And we love this Psalm. So, while we understand the need for some walls and fences, we also understand that God's goodness is most vividly experienced within a setting without walls and fences.

The literal physical walls of the ancient and current world provided a barrier between peoples. They are literal walls, but they are based on psychological and ideological walls of perceived hostility, threats, and differences between groups. Our current walls may at times be literal and physical, but most certainly we also have those psychological and ideological walls continue to divide us. Paul was concerned chiefly with the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles, also referred to as the circumcised and the uncircumcised, since Jewish law required circumcision of males, in contrast to most of the rest of the world. Jews made up a tiny percentage of the population in the ancient world, but they were a clearly demarcated group because of their adherence to the law and their determination to remain uniquely Jewish, in contrast to the rest of the world, the Gentiles---Gentile meaning simply anyone who wasn't a Jew. We, for example, are Gentiles by this definition. The early Christian church was originally formed from those of the Jewish faith, but quickly grew to include Gentiles, non-Jews. This created perhaps the first, hugely significant conflict the fledgling Church had to resolve. For a Gentile to become a Christian, a follower of Jesus, must they first become a Jew, like the very first followers were initially? You can see where having to obey a multitude of laws governing daily life,

including requirements about cleanliness, food preparation, and circumcision, would have enormously slowed down the growth of the fledgling Christian church. But many of the original disciples, all Jewish, believed this should be a requirement. Paul, however, that more worldly Jew, who had grown up as a Roman citizen, saw that this wall of division was simply not necessary. Becoming a Christian didn't mean having to become a Jew first. God's grace was open to all, regardless of background, and Christ's cross erased the need for these divisions and walls of hostility. Paul's viewpoint carried the day, and because of that, the Church encompasses people of all nationalities and races and backgrounds to this day. It's not about walls of division; it's about Christ on the cross welcoming all people.

How then, shall we apply this to our own times? The distinction between Gentile and Jew isn't very significant to us in our time and place. Distinctions between male and female continue to exist, though they are probably less painfully obvious than they once were. We continue to be haunted by racism, so deeply embedded within us we often don't even recognize it. Certainly, socioeconomic class and divisions are still present and can be raw. At this moment in time, with a fall Presidential election looming, we are likely *most* aware of the ideological walls that exist within our polarized citizenry, and that division is not merely theoretical or academic, it is actively hostile, as we see time and again. We *struggle* to be civil to one another if we are of different political stripes, and sadly, our political parties and leaders foster fear and misconceptions, stoking up the hostility. Which means that our current political climate appeals to the lowest common denominator, the *worst* versions of ourselves and others, which is really a sad statement of reality. Those dividing walls of hostility seem all too present.

Here's a little story that might give us a bit of hope, though. One of my younger clergy colleagues told of how he addressed the Duluth City Council meeting last Monday night, as some ordinances were presented that impact on a number of complicated issues, including homelessness, public safety, tourism, and the right to assembly. It was a standing room only crowd, and my colleague, used though he was to preaching to a congregation, found the intensity of the polarization among those present to be intimidating. Nonetheless, he so very wisely began by finding common ground. He said that he knew everyone present shared the same

concerns for public safety, for the prosperity of our community, and for solutions for homelessness. He further stated that everyone present had the same goal in mind: a peaceful, safe community. He then went on to discuss some of the differing approaches that grew out of these similar concerns and aimed towards similar goals, without judging or demonizing either side. *That's* how we can break down some walls of division; by seeking common ground, by not demonizing those who think differently, by not presuming that we stand on higher moral ground than everyone else. So, my colleague provides us with an inspiring example of tearing down walls instead of building them up further.

Our Psalm this morning pictures God as Shepherd, a beautiful and peaceful image. In the Gospel of John, Christ refers to Himself as The Good Shepherd, the one who gives His life for the sake of the sheep. We know and love these shepherding images associated with God in Christ, I believe. But our text from Ephesians gives us a little different image of God in Christ to ponder---maybe a startling image. Christ as wall-breaker. Christ with a wrecking ball? Christ with a bulldozer? Christ with dynamite? Christ with a sledgehammer? What does it take to break down a wall of division, of hostility? Maybe it takes someone walking along together each side of the wall, not looking to repair it and build it higher, but taking off one stone at a time? Maybe Christ breaks down the walls with love, the love revealed in Christ on the cross? Maybe we can try to do the same? “For Christ is our peace, he has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us,” Paul writes. So then—you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” From God’s perspective, no walls stand between us and God, or between us and each other. Can we find a way to share that perspective? As we do so, we contribute to taking down walls of division and hostility, and we help to build up the peaceful world God envisions. Amen.