

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 19, 2015
Pentecost 8
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 57:15-21
Psalm 22:22-30
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-44

One of my favorite poems is written by Robert Frost and is entitled, “Mending Wall.” The poem describes a wall that divides Frost’s property and that of his neighbor. The poet and his neighbor are constantly mending the wall, picking up and replacing stones that have fallen down. It’s as though the wall conspires against them and refuses to stay up. In Frost’s words, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

His neighbor, however, thinks the wall is necessary and good. His philosophy, handed down to him by his father, is that “good fences make good neighbors.”

Frost, however, remains unconvinced, and maintains his own assertion: “something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

If we listen to the apostle Paul this morning, we might conclude that it is not *something* that doesn’t love a wall, but rather *someone*. It is the Creator God. God is trying to build a new humanity and unite all things in Jesus Christ, because the

walls that we human beings build to isolate ourselves from one another prove to be divisive, and ultimately, deadly.

Unfortunately, it is religious walls that are perhaps *the* most divisive and destructive barriers of all.

If you don't believe me, just travel to what was formerly Yugoslavia. Or take a trip to Northern Ireland, or select parts of Syria.

If we paused a moment, we could draft a list of walls closer to home. There are walls between Catholics and Protestants.

There are walls between Liberals and Conservatives.

There are walls between Evangelicals and Mainline Protestants.

There are walls between Orthodox and Western Christians.

There are walls *between* conservative evangelical Christians.

Why do we build these walls, and why are they so necessary?

The reasons could be many:

Fear: I don't know who you really are, and I'm afraid to risk finding out.

Greed: I must keep you away in order to prevent you from having what I have.

Ignorance: I perceive you to be "this way or that way." My perception may be wrong, but it is based on years of accumulated teaching and experience.

Selfishness: I don't want to share what I have with you, or to be in community with you.

Hatred: I am angry at you for past wrongs or present actions.

Apathy: It's always been this way. We've always fought and argued, and to remove the walls between us would be costly and disruptive.

There could be hundreds of reasons. But in the end, none of them measures up against the grace of the Creator who desires to unite all things and peoples in Jesus Christ. As far as the apostle Paul is concerned, every wall that separates one human being from another was shattered into oblivion as the Son of God hung on the Cross and took upon himself the sins of the whole world.

St. Francis of Assisi was once struggling with God's call upon his life, and so he retreated to a little church in San Damiano, a village not far from where he lived. The walls of the little church were crumbling from years of neglect and from old age. Still, Francis found there a quiet place to pray and to reflect.

One day, he looked up at the altar and into the face of Jesus on the Cross which was there. Then he heard Jesus' voice: "Francis," Jesus said from the Cross, "Go and repair my church."

Francis immediately got up and got to work, doing all he could to repair that old church.

Our lesson from Ephesians this morning talks about another piece of “sacred construction.” God is building something. God in Christ has established a new edifice of faith, a place where God’s Spirit has chosen to dwell. It is called the Church.

And guess what the architectural design of this new edifice is? Guess how the Church is built? She is built upon Jesus Christ as the Cornerstone, with the apostles and prophets as the solid foundation.

But guess how the rest of the structure is built. It is built upon the ruins of *religious* walls and structures that divide Jews from Gentiles, rich from poor, slave from free, those who were far from God and excluded from the covenant promises from those who were called to embody those promises.

Now I realize that the central thrust of Paul’s discussion here centers around Jews and Gentiles. Jesus died and shed his blood in order that Jews and Gentiles might come together as one and proclaim God’s glory to the world. The Son of God has given himself in order that those walls might no longer be mended, but torn down.

But surely one plausible implication of this would be God’s grief and sadness at the unholy divisions that continue to be perpetuated in the church. And in many cases, those divisions continue to exist *not because they are*

insurmountable, but because Christians lack the will and commitment to overcome them.

Just a little bit later in this same letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes these words: “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (4:4-6)

Depending on the sources you check, at last count there are now upwards of 33,000 denominations in the world. Can we honestly read these words from Paul with a clear conscience? Can we honestly read these words from Paul without admitting that fundamentally something is very wrong?

Each week we pray in our prayers that the Church might be one. And each week we recite in the creed our belief *in one holy, catholic, apostolic Church*. But to hear Paul speak in Ephesians, Christ has *already* made the Church one by his death. The Church’s task is to *be* what Christ has already made us.

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall. Indeed, that something is *Someone*.

In the sixteen year history of this young congregation, one of the important characteristics of this church has been that, in our own small way, we have tried to proclaim to all who would listen that God’s heart is broken at the walls and fences

that continue to divide nation from nation, people from people, and Christians from Christians.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us do so with gratitude and humility. Let us ask God for grace that we might build *relationships*, not *fences*. And let us pray for the day when the apostle Paul's words to the Ephesians will no longer be an ideal toward which we aspire, but a reality into which we live.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.