

## *Un-mending Wall*

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Text: Ephesians 2: 11-22

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down,” wrote Robert Frost. The line is from his poem entitled, “Mending Wall.” I had to memorize that poem in high school, and I’ll bet that some of you did, too. The poem is about two neighbors who, every year in the spring, walk along a classic New England stone wall built out of loose rocks that separates their properties. Every year, the winter freezing and thawing of the earth produces the heaving and rolling of the ground that brings down the rock piles. It’s the same process that creates the potholes in our roads.

The poet asks his neighbor why they need to go to all the trouble of repairing the wall. “He is all pine and I am apple orchard. My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.” To which the neighbor replies in the most frequently quoted phrase of the poem, “Good fences make good neighbors.” It’s ironic that this is the part of the poem we remember, because it’s the line that is most at odds with the poem’s sentiments.

There are different kinds of walls, with different functions. The writer of today’s passage from Ephesians begins with walls that are meant to divide. I have seen way too many of them in my lifetime. Many of us remember—perhaps some of us visited or even passed through—the Berlin Wall that separated the formerly divided capital of Germany between the eastern, communist-controlled sector and the

western American and European administered areas. We remember the dramatic dismantling of that wall in 1989, how people appeared with hammers and chisels and brought it down, brick by brick, chunk by chunk. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” There is today no trace of that wall in Berlin, only monuments to its former existence. And there is a line in the road that tells you where the wall used to be.

I lived for a time on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, which remains an island divided between its Greek and Turkish-speaking inhabitants. A wall runs through Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus. That wall physically separates people who speak different languages, Greek and Turkish; people who call themselves Christians on one side of the wall and Muslims on the other. But they all are Cypriots; they look alike; they share the same love for their beautiful island and for their common culture. They all love its wine and eat its olives and citrus fruits and savor its beaches.

In Beirut, it wasn’t a wall that separated Christians and Muslims, but rather a misnamed “green line,” a zone of rubble guarded on either side by young men with scary weapons. They didn’t build a wall, but between the sectors guarded by those militiamen there was a barrier every bit as impermeable as a wall. Today, that wall, too, is gone, and where devastation separated the so-called Muslim West Beirut from the Christian East, there are now museums and restaurants and beautiful new apartment buildings. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

In Jerusalem, even after the 1967 War that supposedly reunited the city, bringing down the fence that separated the predominantly Palestinian East Jerusalem from the entirely Jewish West Jerusalem—even after that fence came down, an invisible but real wall remained and still remains between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims and Christians. And today a wall that is complete with barbed wire and electronic sensors, separates Israel from much of the West Bank.

And today, here, in our country, there is the proposal, the effort, really, to wall off our country from our neighbors to the South.

Walls are not the product of human ingenuity; they are the product of human failure and human fear. They represent a failure of human imagination, of human love. Walls inevitably leave people stranded on the wrong side: family members are kept apart from one another, and the common humanity that we all share is denied. I remember an Easter Sunday morning when from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and during a sunrise Easter service, I watched automobiles carrying Palestinian Christians from Bethlehem being stopped at an Israeli checkpoints and being turned back from Jerusalem, the scene of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Christians in those cars were not admitted because their license plates were the wrong color. They were West Bank cars, so they couldn't enter Jerusalem, couldn't carry worshippers to the Church of the Resurrection where, in the shadow of the tomb and Calvary, they wanted to proclaim, "al-Masih qam," "Christ is risen."

Sometimes I think that the real wall in this world is between the wall-builders and the wall-dismantlers, between those who describe themselves as hard-headed realists—the "good fences make good neighbors" crowd—and those who long for the kind of community that walls deny, that walls make impossible. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down."

St. Paul began his career as a wall-builder, or at least a wall-maintainer. The temple in Jerusalem to which Paul made his yearly pilgrimage had a dividing wall in it. That wall separated those who had fulfilled all the ritual laws from those who hadn't; those who were full-blooded Jews and those who were considered to be Gentiles. To use Paul's terminology, the dividing wall separated what he called

“the circumcision” from “the un-circumcision.” But the wall didn’t just run through the temple, it ran right through the pre-conversion Paul’s view of the world. Before his conversion, Paul’s world was a neatly compartmentalized place; it was an “us and them” world, insiders and outsiders, washed and unwashed.

But listen to Paul after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. “In Jesus Christ, you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It is Jesus who brings down the walls of division between us, and he does that by first abolishing the wall between the human and the divine, between God and us. It is Jesus who reconciles us to God through the cross, and because we are reconciled to God, we are called to be reconciled to one another. Because of Jesus we no longer speak of “divine right” as being somehow different from human rights. God became one of us so that we together might draw closer to God. That great dividing wall between God and us had come down not through the roll and heave of seasonal freezing and thawing, but through the seismic change caused by the cross.

I believe that churches are measured, and will be judged, by the extent to which they dismantle walls of separation: between God and people who seek to know God; between black and white, rich and poor; gay and straight, between the supposedly respectable and the supposedly disreputable. There are lots of walls in our society, and our job as the church is to do our best to tear them down. We are not called to be wall-menders; we are called to be wall-dismantlers.

Nor are all of those dividing walls external to ourselves. We use walls to exert control, to establish order when a little spirited disorder would be healthier for us and for those around us. I’m talking about the walls we erect between our bodies and spirits, between our religion and our politics, between our Sunday-morning

piety and our everyday lives. Something there is that doesn't love these walls, that wants them down.

But there are some walls that we need, walls that hold things together. Paul knew the difference between dividing walls and supporting walls, and talked about them both. If you've ever done any home renovation you'll know that there are some walls that serve only cosmetic, or organizational purposes. Those are walls that you can build up or tear down at will. And then there are walls that you can't do anything with because they're essential; they support the whole structure. Dividing walls are transitory; supporting walls are enduring. Without supporting walls, there is no structure.

In Ephesians we read that we are members of the "household of God, built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone." The supporting walls come together at the foundation stone, which is Jesus. But there's an interesting variant to that reading noted in the footnotes to our New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The word for "cornerstone" may also be read as "keystone" or "capstone." In the days before buildings had steel substructures, the capstone was the stone at the very pinnacle of the arch; it was the stone that bore the weight and the stress of the upward thrust of the two arms of the arch. Without the capstone, the whole building would collapse.

Jesus is the capstone of our faith; Jesus is what holds it together. Every once in a while, someone will tell me that they believe in God, or that there is a God, but that they have trouble with Jesus. Paul tells us that there is a specificity in Jesus, a particularity, a personality that can be lost in all our fuzzy generalizations about God. It is Jesus who keeps us in focus, who tells us with the clarity of a life lived, a death experienced, a resurrection that overcomes death, what God is like and who God is. Jesus is the very point of it all. That's why Paul says that in him the

whole structure is joined together; in him we are built together in the Spirit, into a dwelling place for God.

The church, if it is faithful to its builder and its head, is all support and no division. The church is a dwelling place for God and for those who seek God; the church is God's invitation to us to come together in community. The church is a where we seek to find Christ's peace, where the stranger is welcome, where the alienated one is brought near. The church, when it is true to itself, is Christ's presence in a divided and angry world.

Believe this good news. Jesus came to proclaim peace to you who were far off and peace to those who are near. For through him all of us have access in one Spirit to our loving Creator. Amen.