

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 19, 2009
Pentecost 7
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 having to mend 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.

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 and among 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," when in reality my perception might be quite wrong.

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, at Calvary every wall that separates one human being from another was dynamited 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.

Now 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, and on the apostles and prophets as a 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.

Jesus has died and shed his blood in order that Jews and Gentiles, Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants might come together as one and proclaim God's glory to the world. The Son of God has given himself in order that the walls we build between ourselves and others might no longer be mended, but torn down. God's purpose for the world will not be fulfilled until God's purpose for the Church is fulfilled, and God's design for the Church is that she be one. One Lord, one Faith, one baptism.

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 now is to be what Christ has already made us.

This might seem a rather hopeless task, given the sincere differences of opinion shared by godly persons throughout the Church. Those differences are

substantive enough that we may never see political or theological unity in the Church. And we may never see liturgical unity or unity in the ways the Church worships. That would be to confuse unity with uniformity.

There is a unity which remains possible, however. It is a eucharistic unity, a unity at the Table of the Lord. For even if you disagree about how God works in the sacrament, the bottom line is that at the Table of the Lord, all Christians are one. And at his Table, every wall -- whether it be religious, theological, social, or racial -- is broken down.

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

In the ten 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 here to the Ephesians -- words about a new humanity centered around Jesus -- will be not just a hopeful 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.