

The Dividing Wall

Ephesians 2:11-22

9th Sunday after Pentecost/July 21, 2024

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The world is full of walls, fences, divisions. They all have a purpose: to keep something out or to keep something in. I am reminded of that poem by Robert Frost, "Mending Wall":

Something there is that doesn't ope 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.

In the poem the speaker and his neighbor gather each spring to mend the wall, and the speaker teases his neighbor with the thought that we don't really need the wall:

There where it is we do not need 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.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'¹

Sure, we need some walls in our world, but we all know that walls can also lead to division and violence, and not all walls serve God's purposes.

The wall that divides and polarizes America is getting higher. The culture wars are hotter than ever. And a week ago a former president was wounded by a wanna-be assassin. It's not clear that the attempt on his life was politically motivated. Unfortunately, in our super-polarized environment, there are those who are spinning that idea, and thereby adding more bricks to the walls that divide our society. We need to be patient about the motivation, and yet the anxiety is growing around our political divisions because of this attempted assassination. One editorial in the New York Times was entitled: "Our Nation Is Not Well: Voters Fear What Could Happen Next." The writer quotes presidential historian, Timothy Naftali, that even before the shooting in Pennsylvania, Americans "were barely on speaking terms with each other. The result, he said, has been a national mood that has been "unstable, restless, uncertain, irritating and anxious" since the 2016 election. In May, a Marist poll found such dug-in disdain that many Americans considered a second civil war likely or very likely in their lifetime. The walls of hostility that divide us are there.

And then we hear the jarring text of the morning: "For [Christ] is our peace ... He has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us." Really? I find this a challenge to understand, especially when society feeds on hostility and anger, finger pointing, demonizing the other and drawing boundaries between people, name-calling and bigotry. All of this is part of our national DNA. In the church at Ephesus, there is hostility also. Two factions exist. One is a Jewish Christian group, following the Jewish Torah. Paul calls them the "circumcision." And then there are Gentile Christians, non-Jewish believers in Christ, the "uncircumcision." Their arguing has created a wall of hostility, and there is really nothing more sad than a good old-fashioned church fight. The early church was struggling with how to live in the light of an extraordinary gift that had been given to them, the gift of unity. They think they are different and divided. Only in their minds. In God's eyes they are one people. In the death of Christ, Paul is saying, Christ has made peace with all peoples, insiders and outsiders. God's covenant with the Jewish people has been expanded to include all humanity. Even the Torah no longer divides; it has been transformed to become a vehicle of inspiration to all people. Christ is our peace. Christ is our unity. All the diverse and divided people are joined together in one community of love. There are no aliens anymore. No strangers. No outsiders. Just God's beloved people.

Is my MAGA-loving neighbor my enemy? Not in Christ. Is my liberal-loving neighbor my enemy? Not in Christ. Maybe knowing that we have a unity achieved, not by us, but achieved through the blood of the cross, by the love of God for all, demands from us not demonization of our fellow Americans, but compassion for them. We have been given a gift, and we can't hold onto a gift with a clinched fist. We have to open it to the strangers, the leftist, the rightist, brothers and sisters, Democrat, Republican, fellow citizens, all children of God. How do we do that? In a culture rife with division and violence, how do we Christians live? There is a way.

There is a story told by an ancient rabbi that a noisy crowd surrounds each of us. Wherever we go, this crowd goes with us. So, we are never alone. The voices in this crowd never go silent. The louder we speak, the louder their voices. Who is this noisy crowd? The rabbi says that is the angels of God. A procession of angels passes before each person saying, "Make way for the image of God."ⁱⁱ According to the book of Genesis every person is made in the image and likeness of God. Every human being is an icon of God. The presence of God in which we live and move and have our being is in some way declaring that to honor a human being, the image of God, is to honor God, the Creator. What we say or do to each other, we say or do to God. What we fail to say or do to each other, we fail to say or do to God.

We honor God by honoring our fellow human beings, even those with whom we disagree. Civility is the Christian path. It means we listen to another with the possibility that we might be wrong, and they might be right. To live in a democratic society means that we will disagree and requires us not hide differences, but to resolve them with respect for the other. Criticism of others is necessary at times, but it must be done civilly and with the knowledge that our opponents are made in God's image too. Violence against another person is a desecration of God. And that violence includes not only our actions, but also our words. In a democracy, differences are resolved not violently, but peacefully. That includes resistance to political authorities. Our love of our neighbor includes our love for our enemies, and to love our enemies is to love and to honor God. We must pray for our country, for our politicians, for greater unity in the church and in society, for tolerance and compassion, for open minds, hearts, and hands.

There is an ancient tale about the shepherds who watched their flocks in the fields around Bethlehem. They loved to debate and discuss into the wee hours of the night. One night toward dawn, their spiritual guide, an older shepherd, asked them a question: "How can we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?" "Could it be", replied one of the impetuous younger shepherds, "that we know the night is ended when we look out to the flock and distinguish between the sheepdog and the sheep?" The wise Teacher said, "No, that's a good answer, but not the one I would give." After a long silence another voice said, "Perhaps we know daylight has begun when we can look at the trees around us and distinguish an olive tree from a fig tree." Again, the Teacher said, "That's a fine answer also, but not the one I seek." At last they begged the Teacher to tell them the answer he was seeking. He looked at each of them intently for a moment and then said, "When you look into the eyes of a human being and see a sister and brother, you know that it is morning. If you cannot see a sister or brother, you will know it is still night."¹ Let us work together for the ending of the night, and the beginning of a new day, for a world in which dividing walls of hostility are demolished and peace reigns.

Let us pray: Hear our prayers this morning as we lift up our hearts and seek from you the grace of magnanimity, the ability to differ and yet love, the beauty of tolerance and a large heart. Grant us your grace to transform us into disciples of Christ who said, "By this shall all people know that you are my disciples, that you love one another." Amen.ⁱⁱⁱ

¹ Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," published on-line, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall>

Told by Michael K. Marsh, online, <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2013/01/13/make-way-for-the-image-of-god/>

Story told in a sermon by J. Barrie Shepherd, "Did the Fundamentalists Win", found in [A Preaching Ministry: Twenty-one Sermons Preached by Harry Emerson Fosdick](#), published by the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 2000, pp.383-384.

¹ Based on a prayer by Harry Emerson Fosdick, quoted in the reference above.
