

Sermon for Sunday, July 22, 2018

OF FENCES AND NEIGHBORS

Ephesians 2:11-22 / Mark 6:53-56

We are by nature “children of wrath,” like everyone else. But *God* is rich in mercy, because God loves us with great love. The way we behave, we are dead to what is really going on in the world. While we are stingy, God’s doles out “immeasurable riches of grace” because, unlike us, God is infinitely kind. If anything good happens, it is not our own doing but God’s gift. That is why we have no reason to boast. In light of what God has done for us in Christ, watching out for our neighbors in need is not simply a suggestion but it is the way of life which God has prepared for us.

The author of the letter to the faithful in Ephesus certainly comes out swinging. He, or she, does not mince words. Rather, she ups the ante. “Remember that you were [at one time] without Christ, being regarded as aliens, which means being cut off from the commonwealth of Israel, without rights or protection, homeless and entirely foreign to the covenant of God’s promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

Now, there’s a prime example of exceptional pastoral care, a terrific way to motivate people. Hit them over the head as hard as you can with a two by four until they finally stop dead in their tracks and perhaps begin to listen. Personally, I am not a big fan of this approach but I am beginning to wonder. I am beginning to wonder why this author used such drastic rhetorical measures. Shouldn’t he, as a disciple of Christ, stroke his flock with a velvet glove rather than pound them with a sledge hammer?

While I still question this take-no-prisoners-approach, I can certainly understand the urgency and passion behind it. After all, “Christ Jesus has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility” between all the warring factions of his day at the greatest personal cost. He gave his life that others, that all, might live. Together. In harmony. And in peace. “He is our peace,” the writer asserts. “He made peace to reconcile all to God in one body through the cross. He proclaimed peace. And then, he proclaimed peace again.” Four times, the author harps on Christ being, bringing, and making peace. There is no way of spinning, misinterpreting, misspeaking, mistranslating or misconstruing the meaning of Christ’s mission: bringing peace. This, by extension, is the mission of everyone who claims and professes to be Christ’s disciple. Peace is what “God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

But is it? Is being peaceful, bringing and making peace truly our human way of life? I don’t think it is. At worst, we humans are a mean, divisive, and warring bunch. At best, we are ambivalent about peace. We want peace, until we don’t. In 1914, just a little more an a hundred years ago now, the great American poet Robert Frost published his famous poem, *The Mending Wall*. In the poem, two people walk alongside each other, inspecting their pastures after winter is over and while doing that they get into an argument. You will recognize its most famous line right away. Here is what Frost had to say, in part:

He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’ ... and I wonder, If I could put a notion in his head: ‘*Why* do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it where there are cows? But here there are no cows. Before I build a wall I’d ask to know What I was walling in or walling out, And to whom I was like to give offense. Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, That wants it down.’

This poem has been analyzed, pun intended, until the cows come home. It is not altogether clear from Frost’s perspective what exactly he is after, and he himself was very coy about it when asked. But read from the perspective of the letter to the Ephesians, the conclusion to be drawn goes something like this:

Christ wants that wall, any wall, fence, or human-made obstacle down. He gave his life in pursuit of breaking down any kind of hostility that separates us from one another. He lived for it. He died for it. Died for the conviction that life together in community is better than life lived in separation. God created us for communal life, in all its glorious, and sometimes annoying difference. To build “walls” and fences—physical, emotional, economic, strategic, spiritual, ecclesiastical or otherwise—to build any kind of wall that separates us from our neighbors cheapens the sacrifice Christ made on our behalf. In other words, building walls is an affront to God.

If history proves anything, it is that building walls and fences that separate people from each other has never worked. I speak from personal experience. My father was Roman-Catholic, my mother is Lutheran. When they got married in the early 50’s, it took their families years to acknowledge their marriage and years more to even speak to each other. That wall crumbled when I married a foreigner, an “ugly American,” and became a vegetarian Presbyterian. In 1987, Ronald Reagan challenged the then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev “to tear down that wall” which separated my native country into West and East Germany. Two years later, I watched that wall being torn down on my birthday in 1989 on TV in my apartment in Houston, TX. I’ve seen *ecclesiastical walls* tumble when the church made way for same-gender people to get married and ordained, *political walls* crumble when *Apartheid* failed, *personal walls* pulverized when siblings reunited after not having spoken in decades. And the walls, all the walls and fences we construct so carefully, for whatever reason, sooner or later come tumbling down. It is only a matter of time. Because Christ is our peace who “has torn down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

Would that we could not only hear but take to heart the reality which the writer of Ephesians proclaims for us: “So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints, and also members of the household of God. For in Christ you are joined together, you are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” He speaks about us, Christ’s body, the church.

I am thrilled that this congregation has decided to follow Christ’s example by building partnerships and bridges rather than walls and fences. The renovation of our cottage has to do with one of these partnerships. You may have noticed that it looks a little different on the outside, and it most definitely looks very different on the inside. Many of our members have put in countless hours of work to make this happen. The reason for this renovation is our latest partnership with *Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis*, the oldest interfaith organization of its kind in the United States which is about to move in there. Our partnership is our mutual understanding of how important it is in today’s world to be good neighbors to each other, to support each other and to work together toward the common good of our community. You will hear more about our partnership on August 12 when we will welcome them in worship and when they will host an *Open House*. I hope you will take this wonderful opportunity to get to know our new partners and neighbors up close.

But we do not welcome *Interfaith Partnership* selflessly. We welcome them because Christ has torn down every dividing wall of hostility. We welcome them because God prepared this beforehand to be our way of life. We welcome them because in this way we honor the great sacrifice Christ has made for us all on the cross so that, together we might live ... in peace.

So, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Both now, and forevermore. Amen.

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