



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

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Taking Down Fences Acts 1:1-11; Luke 10:25-37

I've been thinking about fences lately. About two months ago, my boys adopted three-year-old Charlie, a Beagle-Black Lab mix, which my dad has described as a sawed-off lab. Except that he is soot black from nose to tail, Charlie is all Beagle, from his stature, to his floppy ears, to his tell-tale howl. The only other retriever characteristic we have noticed so far is that Charlie has a vertical that would rival most NBA players. For such a small dog, especially when he's excited, Charlie can leap from a stationary position so that his hind legs are nearly waist high.

Charlie's athleticism, combined with the fact that he is a rather clever escape artist, means that we have had to repair gaps in the backyard fence and inspect it regularly to make it as difficult as possible for him to get out.

Although I have been concerned about maintaining a fence that will keep the newest member of our family secure, many people are concerned about fences that will keep those perceived as threatening or dangerous out. Frequently, for example, our Gatekeepers homeowners, especially those who are elderly and live alone, will ask us to repair or install fences in order to keep people from passing through their yards and close to their homes at all times of the day and night.

Of course, there are other reasons fences may be desirable. As American poet Robert Frost wrote, when speaking of the ways we divide rather than unify ourselves, "Good fences make good neighbors."¹ Two of last year's Gatekeepers sites were side by side. One house had a neat, uncluttered yard. The yard of the next door neighbor was filled with stuff that the homeowner was certain she would need someday, and the fence between their yards was beginning to sag from the weight of the old storm windows and tires and scrap metal propped against it. On one of my visits to their houses, the first neighbor asked if we could repair the fence, even though it was on her friend's property. She said, "I love her, but if that fence

¹Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," in *The New Enlarged Anthology of Robert Frost's Poems* (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1971).

comes down, there won't be anything keeping her junk from taking over my yard, too!" Maybe, sometimes good fences indeed make good neighbors.

Another well-known American poet, Carl Sandburg, expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote, "Love your neighbor as yourself, but don't take down your fence."² We seem to have developed a cultural assumption that fences are a necessary part of life. We build fences to keep out, fences to keep in, fences to protect, fences that are more beautiful than functional. We are surrounded by fences, and we often don't even notice them until they become an obstacle for us.

Of course, it's not only physical fences that we construct in our community and world. We devise all kinds of clever, and often subtle, ways to divide ourselves, not just physically, but also emotionally and spiritually, including some but keeping out those who are different or who we perceive as threatening. It seems that we love our privacy as well as a clear delineation of what belongs to us, and even those of us who want to be neighborly also want some sense of security and control over who is allowed close to us.

So, whether life imitates art or art imitates life,³ that two of the greatest American poets would acknowledge, or even encourage, that we make better neighbors when we have fences between us, is certainly telling of our collective mindset.

Jesus, however, had other ideas about neighborliness. Hear this account from Luke 10 (vv. 25-37):

Jesus and his disciples were in the middle of a celebration! Jesus had sent out the Twelve, along with seventy other followers, to teach and preach and heal throughout their region, and they had just returned, reporting great success in their efforts. Many had come to believe the message that the kingdom of God had come near in the ministry of Jesus, but just as they were sharing this good news, an expert in the Jewish law came by to test Jesus. He clearly knew the answer to his own question. Perhaps he was trying to entrap Jesus, as the scribes and Pharisees often did, or maybe he wanted to see for himself if Jesus really was the Messiah. Maybe he was looking for a chance to show off and prove his own knowledge of the law, to build himself up by tearing Jesus and his disciples down. Sometimes in our insecurities, this is one of the fences we may be tempted to build.

² Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) #49 from *The People, Yes*, 1936

³Attributed to Oscar Wilde.

Instead of putting him in his place, however, Jesus gives him a chance to answer his own question, and when the man quotes the heart of the Jewish teaching from Deuteronomy, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself,”⁴ Jesus affirms his answer.

But when the man pushes Jesus further, Jesus responds with what would become the most well-known and influential of his parables, a story that calls into focus so many of the fences we erect to separate ourselves from one another: fences of religious purity or legalism, of racism and prejudice, of self-importance and suspicion. Sadly, we are often experts at building fences of race, gender, sexual orientation, political party, educational achievement, economic status, neighborhood. And when we run out of categories, we find other reasons to build fences among ourselves. We have become master fence builders, believing them to be necessary for securing our own well-being or values or way of life.

Jesus, I believe, would disagree with Carl Sandburg because his life and ministry were focused on the work of taking down fences. In order to love neighbor as self, we must tear down the fences that separate us, that keep us at arm’s length from one another, that prevent us from understanding those who may look or speak or believe differently than we do.

It seems to me that in this encounter and in the parable he told, Jesus was all about taking down fences in order to demonstrate our love for God and our neighbors more fully. Indeed, throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus was a master fence dismantler. From his first sermon in his hometown synagogue where he proclaimed the good news of release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed⁵; to every act of healing and feeding and showing mercy to those in need; to his inclusion of sinners and tax collectors, of foreigners and lepers and women and all kinds of “unclean” and vulnerable people; Jesus took every opportunity to show that loving God with our whole selves and loving our neighbors as ourselves means taking down the fences and walls that surround us, especially those in the form of legalisms and assumptions and customs that divide us.

When the risen Christ ascended into heaven, he left a group of followers who were, at first, bewildered and frightened. But he left them with a promise: The power of the Holy Spirit will be with you to empower you. And he left them with a purpose: Go out to be my witnesses, even to the ends of the

⁴Deuteronomy 6:1-6

⁵Luke 4:18

earth. The good news of Christ's life and ministry, and of his death and resurrection, is that through him, God has taken down the fences which once hindered us from loving one another as God intends and which had been used to keep those judged as unworthy outside the reach of God's grace. Loving God with our whole selves and loving our neighbors as ourselves means tearing down fences of prejudice and suspicion. It means that when we encounter fences of fear and misunderstanding, we may be called to build a gate wide enough for all God's children to pass through. It may mean that we will even have to do the hard work of dismantling our own elaborate fences of doubt and assumptions and judgments about others so that we can welcome those with whom we disagree or differ. Taking down fences is hard work, but it is the work to which we, as followers of Christ are called.

Today we face the bittersweet task of preparing to send five of our young people out into the world, praying for you, graduates, not only that you will achieve success, but even more that you will find your own place of service in God's Kingdom. Before you is a world that is becoming increasingly adept at building fences to separate people, and as followers of Christ, you, like the rest of us, will be called to take down the fences which some will construct in order to restrict or control other's experiences of God or to convince you to exclude people to whom you are called to be neighbors. Sometimes it will be tempting to participate in such fence building projects, or to concede to them because it seems easier or safer or more expedient. After all, loving God with our whole selves and loving our neighbors as ourselves can be a difficult, messy, complicated matter.

But I pray that you will continue the job of fence dismantling for which your time at Lakeside has, we pray, prepared you. You are a part of a 60-year legacy of working to take down fences in this community. In fact, as I look around this sanctuary, I see some of the best fence dismantlers I know. We have not been without our flaws and failures, but this people called Lakeside has engaged in ministries of loving God and our neighbors in faithful and courageous and creative ways for six decades, and now we commission you to carry on that work wherever your life's journey may take you.

Those of us who are parents or grandparents, ministers or Sunday School teachers, mentors or friends have encouraged you to, or in some cases required you to, come to this place week after week because we believe that here, among this community of believers, you can receive the nurture and encouragement, the tools and knowledge, and most importantly the gifts of the Holy Spirit, so that loving God with your whole selves and loving your neighbors as yourselves will be a significant and natural part of your developing faith. We have encouraged you to make prayer and Bible

study, worship and service, compassion and justice integral parts of your life because they are a secure foundation on which to build your life of faith and will light your path to Christ.

So like Christ's first followers and like the saints who have worshiped and served here on this corner by the lake for the past 60 years, go with the promise that the Holy Spirit will be with you and with the purpose of being Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. Go with the assurance that you are surrounded by the blessings and prayers of these, your fellow fence dismantlers. Go in the hope that whatever obstacles you may encounter along this journey of life, God will grant you the courage, the faith, and most of all the companionship of Christ and of fellow travelers to love God with all that you have and all that you are and to love your neighbors by taking down those fences. Amen.

Like those first believers, we sometimes stand in awe of all that you have done through Christ, O God. We marvel at his birth, listen with surprise to his teachings, are humbled by his compassion, and are filled with wonder at his crucifixion and resurrection. Although we know that we are your created and adopted children, we do not fully understand the love which compels you to pursue our best interests. Admittedly, like those early believers, we sometimes feel abandoned because we cannot always sense your nearness. Even in those moments, you manage to reassure us of your presence and confirm your love, and we are grateful.

We are grateful for the redemptive love we have experience through Christ. In him we have seen a vision of the life you desire for each of us, a life of worshipful gratitude, of humble service, and of joyful engagement with your world. We pray that you will enable us to remove any barrier which might prevent us from sharing the life for which you have created and redeemed us, O God.

We are also grateful for our young people who are beginning their adventure of faithful living. You have graced them with the love of family, the support of friends, the nurture of this congregation, and the opportunities which lie before them. We pray for your protection over them, your grace around them, and your Spirit within them. Keep them mindful of our love for them and guide them with the foundation of faith we have offered to them.

It is in Christ that we have received your gift of love and continue to experience it day by day. We pray that your healing love will be experienced by those who are ill, that your guiding love will reveal the paths of life we should take, and that your restorative love will mend broken relationships at home and throughout our community. We pray that your redemptive love will continue to transform our world and bring us peace.

Above all, O God, liberate us to love as you have loved, to offer ourselves unselfishly as Christ offered himself to us, and to become a gift of love and grace to the world for which Christ lived, died, and rose again that we all might live for you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jody C. Wright
Senior Minister

Trevor Graham's Graduate Remarks

Hello my name is Trevor Graham, son of Linda and Cameron Graham, for those who don't know me. For many years I have sat in these pews and listened to other graduates speak of their time at Lakeside and how it has influenced them; I would reckon that it's now my turn. Over many years of growing up in these grounds with such wonderful people I have learned a very important lesson: love thy neighbor as thyself. This has had a profound impact on me mainly by the love and generosity that this congregation as a whole offers. Countless times I have seen members of this congregation give so much to help others no matter the ethnicity, religion, or background.

One example that keeps coming to mind is Gatekeepers Workcamp. The amount of good work done and time given by this church is just astounding. By having the opportunity to love and help our neighbors of Rocky Mount, as we do ourselves, we are able to spread and grow our love for one another. Gatekeepers, and many other great experiences like this, are what have taught me the meaning of "love thy neighbor as thyself," for these experiences have truly taught me to love others, and even love myself. I would like to thank Elizabeth and Mark for putting up with us and our meddling merriment, the youth committee, Dr. Wright and his family, the youth group and all my friends, and the whole congregation- my neighbors and my family.

Katy Jaber's Graduate Remarks

Throughout my years at Lakeside, I have grown to love it not only as my church but also as my home. From playing on the playground to being in the youth group, Lakeside has been a huge part of my life. Being a part of this youth group has been one of the best decisions of my life. It has taught me not only to embrace being a Christian, but also has taught me to respect other people from different religions and backgrounds by welcoming them with open arms and by loving thy neighbor as thyself.

Mrs. Elizabeth, thank you for everything that you do for our youth group, I don't know how you do it! From planning Gatekeepers to fishing in Alaska, I couldn't be more grateful to you and Mark putting up with us on the many trips we have taken and events we done.

To Carol and Andy, our youth group just wouldn't be the same with you. I mean not many people would deal with a bunch of teenagers! To Dr. Wright, thank you for everything you have done for this church and the community by leading us in worship and teaching us about our faith.

To my parents, thank you for everything that you have done such as making me wake up each week for Sunday school or to do yard work on Saturday mornings... I love you very much!

Finally to the youth group, I will miss the countless laughs, flights with lack of sleep on trips, and the great moments we have all had. I am thankful to say that Lakeside has not only shaped me to be the person I am today, but it has also shaped others around me and I thank everyone for that. So as I leave here, I am very proud to say that this church will always be my home.