

Jon Hauerwas - The Mending Wall – April 17, 2016  
Ephesians 2:14-22 and Romans 8:28,31-39

In 1915, the popular American author, Robert Frost, published his classic poem entitled “Mending Wall.” What follows here are his words, which I consider to be the highlights of that work. Frost writes, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall... at spring mending-time, I let my neighbor know beyond the hill; and on a day we meet to walk the line and set the wall between us once again. We keep the wall between us as we go. To each the boulders that have fallen to each... We wear our fingers rough with handling them. 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.’” And yet, “Spring is the mischief in me,” so “I wonder if I could put a notion in his head: ‘Why do they make good neighbors?’ After all, ‘before I built a wall I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offence.’” But still, “I see him there bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top in each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. He moves in darkness as it seems to me,” yet “he will not go behind his father’s saying, and he likes having thought of it so well he says again, ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’”

Here, Frost describes the tale of two neighbors. Neither of them have any livestock to keep in or to keep out. Instead, they live in a land of apple orchards on one side of the property, and pine trees on the other. The narrator, who also serves as the owner of the apple orchard, can see no reason at all for a fence to separate these two properties. And yet, something even more substantial than this divides them – because all along the line that divides them is a great stone wall.

I have this nagging feeling that for much of the rest of the year, the interactions between these two are severely limited. But, according to the narrator of this poem, we learn that in the spring time each year, the two property owners agree on a time to meet. The point of their annual meeting is simple – to walk along their side of the stone wall that divides them, and to replace all of the rocks, and the stones, and the boulders that have fallen out since this same time last year.

The owner of the apple orchard says, “We wear our fingers rough with handling them.” Clearly, in his mind, this is difficult work with little purpose and with little reward. He seems willing to try another way forward. But, year after year, the resistance is strong. His neighbor seems unlikely to budge. And so, in the end, they simply repair the wall once again, while the owner of the pines repeats those

words that his father taught him long ago, saying “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Robert Frost’s observations tell us a great deal about human nature – that it is often difficult for us to move in a shared direction in pursuit of common goals because there is just so much that divides us. We all know what it is like to encounter a barrier, or a fence, or a wall. Some of these are physical. Some are metaphorical. All of them separate us from our neighbors.

You may recall that the Chinese built the Great Wall to defend themselves against opposing armies from the West. And, in Europe, violence in Northern Ireland led neighbors in Belfast to place barbed wire fences between their homes. Then again, in our own country, controversy is still brewing about the lengthy barrier separating the United States and Mexico.

Each of these examples describes a physical structure, yes. But, each also highlights the persistence of anxiety, conflict, and fear, which is why it feels like such a big weight has been lifted when walls come down – because it symbolizes a

new openness between people. I think of the fall of the Berlin wall. You may recall that speech from Ronald Reagan, who famously said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” And wherever we find ourselves on the political spectrum, there is something inside all us that longs for just that. For unity among people, and for an end to the hostility between us.

When I was living in Worthington, several years ago, I was the President of the Board of Directors for the condominium complex where we lived. And, I remember one time very well when a neighbor of ours in a single-family home wanted to remove the rusty, chain-link fence belonging to our complex. In his opinion, and in mine as well, the fence was an unsightly barrier between our properties. For his part, our neighbor was willing to offer his labor and his time to build something new. He was even willing to pay for part of it.

But, none of this sounded very appealing to one of the other residents in our complex. So a conversation began between these two neighbors. And, it turned into a lengthy discussion about all of the specifics. What kind of wood would the fence be constructed of? Exactly how tall would it be? Would the fence be painted, or

stained, or left natural? And even, how much space would be allotted between each and piece of wood?

This line of discussion went on for weeks without a successful resolution until, ultimately, each of my neighbors took their separate cases to the architectural review board. This was the agency responsible for all property issues in our city. And the review board made a final ruling, which didn't please my neighbor in the single family home. In the end, he simply decided that all of this was more trouble than it was worth. And to this day, that rusty, chain-link fence remains in place, exactly where it was installed 50 years earlier.

In our second lesson this morning from the book of Romans, Paul reminds us that despite the differences between us, there is nothing in all of creation that "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is the good news that we come to Westminster to celebrate this day – that in this messy and difficult world – nothing can finally separate us from the mercy and the compassion of our God.

Friends, if we are to call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, then it is right for us to be transformed in his image – the image of the one who gave everything for our sake, and for the sake of this world. In our first lesson today, we find that Christ “is our peace,” who “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Further, “he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

We are presented this morning with contrasting ways of viewing this world, our neighbors, and our own personal safety. One option beckons us to walk along our side of the wall, looking for ways to patch up any holes we may find along the way. The work will likely wear our fingers rough as we proclaim that “Good fences make good neighbors.”

The other option is to see the image of the risen Lord in everyone we meet, and to hold in tension the desire for personal security and safety with the welcoming love of Christ. “After all, before I built a wall, I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out.” May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.