

Good fences make good neighbors.

The line comes from the classic Robert Frost poem, "Mending Wall."

The poet meditates on the reason for the fence between him and his neighbor on their two New England farms. It is a New England stone fence, made with rocks that are piled and stacked, one on top another, without any mortar.

But the harsh winter and the freezing and thawing of the ground under the wall cause damage that has to be fixed every year. And the poet sees this annual frost damage as a sign that even the ground itself has something against the wall. He says,

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun...*

And so the poet and his neighbor have to set out every spring to walk the fence-line and repair the wall between them as they go along it. And they always keep the wall between them, each picking up the rocks that have fallen on their respective sides.

The poet thinks that there are places where the wall is unnecessary. He says,
*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'.*

But then the poet says he would like to be playful and question the statement, the unexamined adage that 'Good fences make good neighbors.' He says,

*'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.*

Walls to keep cows on their side of the fence? That can be useful. Walls to keep trees from wandering off? Unnecessary. Walls to keep apple trees from stealing pine cones from the pine trees? Totally unnecessary. When it comes to walls, it's important to know what is being walled in or walled out. And the poet proclaims that there is something about an unnecessary wall that makes you want to take it down.

And he further says,
*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.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.'*

In New Testament times, much of Judaism was about erecting walls and barriers. The scribes and Pharisees used wall-building as a primary tactic to guide people in daily spiritual

practices. I won't go into a lengthy discussion here. There were lots of kinds of walls that they talked about. They were sharp dividing lines dealing with purity, dealing with things that were religiously clean or unclean, dealing with things that were Jewish rather than non-Jewish.

St. Paul was trained as a Pharisee. Last week we celebrated his conversion to Christianity. But before that conversion, Paul was a fanatic about maintaining religious boundaries and distinctions and walls.

But now, in our Epistle lesson, Paul talks about how unimportant those distinctions have become compared to the importance of spreading the Gospel. A few years later he will say that all of the previous categories he used to take pride in, all those walls and categories he used to defend, he now regarded as nothing more than rubbish.¹

And here, in the 9th chapter of 1st Corinthians, Paul is talking about laying aside all of those old walls and boundaries and categories in order to spread the Good News of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

To reduce a fairly long and involved argument to its essence, Paul says that he is now willing to meet people where they are in order to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to them.

He famously says, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."² He will go back and forth across the old boundaries that divide people by religion or race or ethnicity. Those old boundaries are no longer important to him. What is important is proclaiming the Good News of God's love made known in Christ Jesus.

The old boundaries Paul used to be so fanatical about protecting are no longer important to him. In fact, a few years later in Ephesians, he will write about the destruction of that wall separating Jews from non-Jews. He will say,

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he... has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross."³

Good fences make good neighbors?

Perhaps if you're trying to keep cattle contained.

But Paul would vehemently argue that the old religious walls which divided Jew from non-Jew no longer applied. All are made one through the cross, through Jesus Christ. As we just sang (at the 10:30 service), "In Christ there is no East or West, in him no South or North."⁴ And as we will sing later, "In Christ all races meet, their ancient feuds forgetting."⁵

¹ Phil 3:8

² 1Cor 9:22

³ Eph 2:13-16

⁴ #529, *The Hymnal 1982*

⁵ #542, *The Hymnal 1982*

As you are undoubtedly aware, recent discussions of walls and boundaries and borders and immigration have become prominent in our national discourse. Such questions are important, but they're not the main point of this sermon.

I will digress for just a few moments, though, to say a few quick things:

1. Most Americans would agree that maintaining national security is of high importance.
2. Most Americans would agree that it is an important part of our national character to be a place of welcome to immigrants from all corners of our globe.
3. Where it gets messy is when we try to devise specific policies that will find the right balance between both of these things.

And good Americans can disagree about specific policies and still be good Americans. And good Christians can disagree about specific policies and still be good Christians.

And I do NOT see it as part of my job as your priest to stand up here in this pulpit and weigh in on specific public policies regarding our borders. In the Episcopal Church we value allowing members to make up their own minds on issues that are not central to the faith. You don't have to agree with me to be part of this church. And you don't have to agree with the person next to you in the pew.

But I would add an insight from biology, which was my minor at Texas Tech. Think of a cell. The integrity of a cell wall is important to the survival of a cell. But the cell wall also has to be somewhat permeable to allow water and other chemicals to cross it in one direction or another. If a cell wall is completely impermeable, the cell will die. But if a cell wall doesn't control or regulate what passes in one direction or another, the cell will also die. It's important for the cell to find the right balance.

And I would argue that the same applies to nation states. National security is important. Welcoming immigrants is important. Finding the right balance is essential.

But I'm also concerned about other walls and other boundaries in our culture.

In my lifetime, I've seen the disappearance of many of the walls and categories that used to divide people. We have made remarkable progress in many ways.

But in the 21st century, I've also seen new walls get erected. Because of the internet, it is now possible to meet and communicate with people who are very much like you, and to ignore others who aren't like you.

Also, it's now possible to select media outlets that will cater to and reinforce your own particular viewpoints. We've always had some of that. In the old days there were magazines and newspapers with various editorial viewpoints.

But now, broadcasting is being replaced by narrowcasting. It's now more and more possible to move through life only interacting with people who are like you, or with views that you agree with.

And thus, we are erecting walls that basically block us from people or viewpoints we disagree with.

The past couple years there have been articles about how to deal with your family at Thanksgiving. Family dynamics can often be complicated. But the thrust of these articles is how to deal with a family member who disagrees with you politically. It's not shocking that family members might disagree. What is disturbing is the assumption that you need to have special tools or special preparation to deal with someone you disagree with. The assumption is that dealing with disagreement is no longer a normal thing.

I see this as a symptom of our larger problem. We're losing a sense of having respectful debates and discussions of divergent viewpoints in the marketplace of ideas. As we become increasingly polarized and increasingly fragmented, I'm afraid we're losing something vitally important.

I remember the days of President Ronald Reagan and House Speaker Tip O'Neill. These two men had EXTREMELY different viewpoints. Yes, in modern parlance you could classify them as "Frenemies." And yet they maintained a relationship with each other.

Tip O'Neill's son writes the following about his father and President Reagan:

"While neither man embraced the other's worldview, each respected the other's right to hold it. Each respected the other as a man. President Reagan knew my father treasured Boston College, so he was the centerpiece of a dinner at the Washington Hilton Hotel that raised \$1 million to build the O'Neill Library there. When Reagan was shot at that same hotel, my father went to his hospital room to pray by his bed."⁶

We've lost that sense of relationship with those with whom we disagree. As Ronald Reagan said, "The person who agrees with you 80% of the time is a friend and an ally—not a 20% traitor."

Yes, in the 21st century it seems we are losing something important.

As our nation and culture become increasingly polarized, one of the most valuable things about the church, one of the most valuable things about St. Paul's, is that we can continue to be a space where people of differing views can come together and worship the living God,

⁶ "Frenemies: A Love Story" NYT 10.05.2012

together. All are welcome at God's table: liberals, conservatives, moderates; Democrats, Republicans, Independents.

12 or 13 years ago I was presiding at services at my parish in Wichita, Kansas. The church building was wider and shallower than St. Paul's. And the celebrant's chair faced the congregation, so it was easier to see people's faces, even if they were in the back row.

One Sunday, during the Old Testament lesson a couple of visitors walked in who appeared to be husband and wife. After a moment I realized that the man was our congressman from the Kansas 4th Congressional District of the US House of Representatives. He and his wife would become regular visitors, showing up ever 4 to 6 weeks or so. But this was their first visit.

Kansas is a red state, and the congressman was a very conservative Republican. And wouldn't you know it. He and his wife slipped into the seats next to one of our most outspoken liberal members. And I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. What would she do with the congressman sitting next to her?

Well, the service went on. Gospel reading. Sermon. Creed. Prayers. Confession. And after the absolution I was really worried. I knew what was coming next. What was about to happen? It was the Peace. And I was watching their row. What was about to happen?

Well, our extremely liberal member turned to our very conservative congressman. And I saw her put out her hand and with a warm and I believe genuine smile on her face, she said, "The peace of the Lord be always with you."

Yes, Robert Frost.
*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.*

Yes, St. Paul.
"Christ Jesus... has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... that he might create in himself one new humanity... through the cross."

May the peace of God which passes all understanding, be amongst you, and remain with you, always.