

NO LONGER STRANGERS

Since the beginning of the Covid pandemic I have been posting a daily devotional on Facebook that I call *A Poem and a Prayer*. Some of you have shared with me that you have found some comfort and encouragement in the poems I've chosen as well as the prayers. I appreciate your feedback! It is good to know it has been of some help.

At this point I have used poetry by literally hundreds of different poets, a few of whom I know personally, like our own Jennifer McLean and Bat Yam's Tanya Hochschild, but most of the poets are folks I have never met. Some very well-known, like Mary Oliver and Carl Sandburg, and others less familiar, like Jeanne Murray Walker and the Sufi poet Hafiz. One of the poets whose work I have used several times now, is New England Yankee, Robert Frost. And based on the number of folks who have viewed those particular postings, as well as direct feedback, it is clear he is a real favorite of many people.

One of Frost's best-known poems is called *Mending Wall*. It draws on the reality that in rural New England, many properties have been surrounded by stone walls, carefully erected between farms and homes. Some of those walls have been around for literally hundreds of years. They have required careful maintenance; stones being replaced when they have fallen prey to gravity or storms. And in times past many a property owner would annually walk the perimeter of his or her property to assess the condition of their walls.

In the poem Frost and a neighbor are out surveying their shared wall following a long winter. And as they assess the damage wrought by the winter's harshest moments, and replace and balance fallen stones, the neighbor says, "Good fences make good neighbors." It is one of the best-known lines in Frost's large body of work. But Frost challenges the neighbor.

"Why do they make good neighbors?" he asks in the poem, "Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What was I walling in or walling out,
And to whom was I like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down."

(*The Poetry of Robert Frost*, 34-35)

The neighbor is, at first silent, and simply continues down the line replacing fallen stones. But then, not wanting to think more deeply about it, he simply repeats the line he first heard from his father, "Good fences make good neighbors." And then goes on with the work at

hand. Much like those who opposed the efforts of folks like John Lewis, who died a year ago yesterday, to tear down the walls of segregation, that farmer was just repeating what he had heard from those who went before him. “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Our reading from the Letter to the Ephesians deals with the question of walls, divisions and boundaries. While its authorship is unclear, it has traditionally been attributed to St. Paul. If it was penned by Paul, scholars suggest it would have been written while he was imprisoned in Rome, where walls would have been especially significant! It is what is called a circular letter, written not to a single church but written with the intent that it be passed from one church to another to another.

The letter addresses a number of issues confronting the early church, but is most concerned about the issue that was dividing those who were part of the newly developing religion that comes to be known as Christianity. The first followers of Jesus were all Jewish. But as the good news was shared in places outside of Palestine, others, Gentiles, non-Jews, accepted the message and committed themselves to following the way of Jesus. Historically, however, Jews did not interact with Gentiles. They ate differently, they dressed differently, they worshipped differently. To interact with Gentiles would put them at risk of being impure. In fact, the Temple in Jerusalem provided an area where Gentiles could come and offer prayers if they wished. But the inner regions of the Temple were walled off and marked with a sign which modern archaeologists have unearthed warning them to go no further or risk great penalty. (<https://www.bible-history.com/archaeology/israel/temple-warning.html>)

And as for Gentiles, they were often contemptuous of Jews, seeing them as outsiders no matter where they lived.

So how would Jews who had chosen to follow Jesus and Gentiles who had made the same choice, be able to be one church? How could they worship together, work together, even eat together? Would Gentiles have to take up Jewish customs and have to follow the Jewish law? Or would Jews have to abandon their old lifestyle and religious practices? Was the wall between them too high to be surmounted?

No, says the author of the letter. In fact, the wall has already been laid to ruin. It has been decimated by Christ Jesus. “He has made both groups one,” writes Paul, “and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” (2:14b) Not only is there “something . . . that doesn’t love a wall,” there is some *one* who doesn’t love a wall. Someone who works to bring walls tumbling down, and that one is God working in and through Jesus.

We live, unfortunately, in a time and place where walls abound. As one commentator notes: "It seems as if the whole world is busy building walls. The United States is building barriers along its southern border . . . The Israelis continue to build a wall to separate themselves from Palestinians . . . [and the list goes on]." (Karen Chakoian, *Feasting on the Word*, B;3, 256) Walls and divisions seem to be everywhere. Racial divides, religious divides, political divides. Walls built with hatred and misinformation. Walls built out of a failure to understand, a failure to respect the right of other to hold a different point of view. Such walls go up between us, around us, even within us.

And God doesn't much like it. Not in the wider world. And not in the church. The church universal, and the local church as well. In fact, God wants and expects the church to be a model for the rest of the world. God expects us to demonstrate that we human beings can get along and work for the greater good despite differences of opinion, despite differences in background, despite differences in religious or political beliefs. But to do that we must be willing to listen to one another. We must be willing to work to understand one another. We must work to find ways to compromise.

Our passage from Ephesians reminded those early Christians that in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus the walls that had kept them apart had been brought down. That in the church Gentiles and Jews "were no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." (2:19) Such a powerful lesson. Yet through the centuries the church keeps forgetting that lesson and keeps trying to build up new walls, higher walls. The eleventh century split between the church in the East and the church in the West. The Reformation. The hundreds of Protestant denominations. Evangelicals and mainline Protestants. Wall after wall after wall. Even within congregations, walls get built. Over and over and over again.

But God keeps calling the church back to the way of Jesus. God keeps saying, "I'm not a fan of walls, friends! I've broken them down, don't build them back! Love one another. Treat one another with respect. Listen to each other. Really listen. You are no longer strangers; you are members of the household of God. Instead of fighting with each other, learn from each other. I made you all different for a reason, so that you could bring a wide array of gifts and skills and ideas to dealing with the issues that confront you as the church and as part of the wider world. Please, do it as the church, united in following the way of Jesus. Do it for yourselves, and for the whole world. You need it. They need it."

I had occasion this week to review the vows I took at ordination, some forty-one years ago and was reminded that in addition to promising to be diligent in my prayers and study of the

scriptures, in addition to faithfully preaching and teaching, in addition to maintaining confidentiality when called for, I promised, and I'm quoting now, "to be zealous in maintaining both the truth of the gospel and the peace of the church, speaking the truth in love." (*Book of Worship, United Church of Christ, 407*) I'm not sure about the zealous part, sometimes my enthusiasm for the task flags and my energy wanes, but I do strive to keep that vow. And the truth of the gospel, as I understand it, is pretty clear: there's some one who doesn't like walls. And that someone is the God made known in the life, the death and the resurrection of the Man of Nazareth, the one we have chosen to serve. Might we work together as followers of Jesus, no longer strangers but members of one household, seeking to be an example, a light, for the world.

Amen

John H. Danner