

“Good walls make good neighbors.” I’m sure you know this line or variations on the theme. This version, “Good walls make good neighbors,” comes from Robert Frost’s poem, “Mending Wall,” and I think it captures the attitude of the people listening to Jesus as he finishes his sermon on the passage from Isaiah that we heard last week.

It’s the rest of Robert Frost’s poem that captures more of the point that Jesus was making. The poem opens with the line: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Nature does seem to take a toll on human-made walls, does it not, through erosion or weathering: mysterious gaps appear over time and stones fall for no discernable reason. And so each year, the narrator of the poem and his neighbor walk the line that separates them to replace the stones that have fallen from the wall that divides their properties.

As they walk, the poet begins to wonder if the wall is necessary: “He is all pine and I am apple orchard,” he thinks to himself. “My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.” But the neighbor only says, “Good fences make good neighbors.” The poet wonders if it would ever be possible to persuade his neighbor that the wall is not necessary, repeating the first line of the poem that names a truth at the heart of our Gospel this morning: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

One such wall has become a prominent feature of the Holy Land. Physically, the wall separates Israeli Jews from Palestinian Muslims and Christians. When it is complete, the wall will be close to 430 miles long. One side calls it the “security” wall. The other side calls it the “containment” wall. The international community has largely condemned the wall, even as it recognizes Israel’s understandable concern for its survival. The wall has decreased a little of the violence, but it has raised the tension considerably.

While I was in Israel, the Anglican Communion also decided to build a fence of sorts. About two thirds of the Primates of the Anglican Communion voted to

draw a line around the Episcopal Church in the U.S., sanctioning us for our decision to allow clergy to celebrate marriages between same-gender couples.

Some of our politicians are promising to build a wall to keep Mexicans from entering the U.S., despite the evidence that such a fence would cost billions of dollars and be largely unsuccessful, even as more Mexicans are leaving the States than coming in. Examples abound. And notice how easy it is to point fingers, but we need to be mindful because that's a response that can decay into building our own walls, and deciding who is in and who is out.

The people listening to Jesus are pleased when they hear him reading lines from Isaiah that promise release, redemption and healing for those who have been cast off by the world. They may even be proud of the hometown boy made good. ("Is not this Joseph's son?") But Jesus pushes further, as if to say, "When I talk about God bringing good news to those on the margins, bringing sight to the blind and setting the oppressed free, I'm talking about God blessing people outside your circle, people like the Gentiles and even potential enemies."

He reminds them of a couple of stories where God blessed not Israel, but two remarkable outsiders. During a famine, God chose not to use any of 7,000 faithful Israelites to feed and protect Elijah. Any of them would have considered it a great honor to help Elijah, but instead God sent him to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, a Gentile foreigner outside Israel's borders. Jesus then recalls when Elisha healed Naaman of Syria, who was a tangible threat to Israel, at a time when none of the lepers of Israel were healed.

These references made the crowd so angry that they drove Jesus out of town where they hoped to throw him off a cliff. Jesus' congregation, you see, would agree with the neighbor in Frost's poem who twice says, "good walls make good neighbors." Surely it is walls that keep you safe, right? Walls certainly mark off important boundaries. Walls can keep dangerous creatures at bay, protecting sheep from wolves, for example. But can walls keep hostile people off of our property and guard our homeland from terrorists? This homeland is where a mass murder takes place every single day. This homeland we share with the Ku Klux Klan, Timothy McVeigh and the Unibomber. Would more walls have kept us safe

from the Boston Marathon bombing, the Umpqua Community College shooting or the Pilchuck High School shootings?

We do, some of us, live in a fearful and dangerous world where walls and locks are necessary. Burien has one of the highest rates of firearm fatalities in the Puget Sound region. Perhaps some good walls really do make good neighbors. Perhaps.

I know that's upsetting, even frightening, to consider. And so let me offer two alternatives to giving in to our insecurities. There is a practical alternative: We can stop just for a split second and question our motives. When we lock the doors to our houses at night to keep ourselves or our families safe, we can notice that this is not how God means for life to be. Walls and all of the ways we define, describe and bracket out the "other" actually slow down or prevent the coming of God's kingdom.

Then there is a courageous, more fruitful, and far more difficult alternative that can be gleaned from 1 Corinthians and Jeremiah: Love. Love is the choice to live into our identity as God's beloved children. The God who formed us in the womb will help us speak God's loving word both inside and outside our own circles without resentment, irritation or fear.

You see, there is an irony at the core of Frost's poem that many people miss. Year after year, the two neighbors talk with each other as they walk the line apparently repairing the physical wall meant to separate. That is to say that the wall apparently created to divide actually brings the two neighbors together. The title of the poem is not "Mending *the* Wall," but "Mending Wall." On the surface, the poem speaks of an experience of repairing a stone wall. Just under the surface, if we will hear it, the poem also speaks about mending human relationships. Throughout the poem, the wall serves to show us a healthy dance of connection and separation between human beings.

The path of love is the harder path, but let me tell you a story about choosing to let God dissolve walls of separation with patient, enduring love. Toward the last few days of our pilgrimage in Israel, we met a pair of astonishing men: Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhanan. The two men laugh easily with each

other and tease each other with obvious affection. They are extremely close and comfortable in one another's company. They clearly know that when you strip away the rest, what matters most is family and friendship.

But these men found out in the hardest way possible how precious life is, when their lives were torn apart by the deaths of their children. Bassam's daughter Abir was 10 when she died; Rami's daughter Smadar was 14. The two families live in Jerusalem and their daughters died in the conflict there. Abir was shot in the head with a plastic bullet outside her school on the West Bank and Smadar was killed in a suicide bombing when she was shopping with her friends on a busy street.

The two fathers have a great deal in common, but Bassam is a Palestinian Muslim and Rami is an Israeli Jew, who claims not to be religious—a statement that Bassam finds amusing. In their youth, each man played his part in the violence: Bassam served seven years in jail for throwing a hand-grenade at a group of Israelis; Rami was a soldier in the Israeli army. And each man lost his daughter to the violence of the other side: the bullet that killed Abir was fired by an Israeli soldier, while the suicide bomber who killed Smadar was Palestinian.

These two grieving fathers share a palpable and pain-filled love—a love that is genuinely inspiring, because Bassam and Rami now regard one another as brothers. They have refocused the energy of their pain toward working together for justice and peace in a community divided by a wall. "This conflict is not worth the life of one more child," Rami told us. "The only way forward is to talk to one another, to understand one another's point of view – and to make concessions."

We have a choice before us. We can choose to give in to a fear-filled atmosphere that promises security through the creation of more and higher walls that stifle our interactions with those outside our circles. Or we can be curious about what separates us from each other. Some walls will prove to be useful, but others will be mending walls that we can walk along with others, learning to see each other in the hands of a merciful and loving God.

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