

A week ago, Pastor Sandy and I attended an installation service at one of our area congregations. Afterwards, we talked a bit about my sermon for today, and she told me I just had to begin with something that would make people laugh. I don't know where she got the idea that I would ever do such a thing, but the pressure was on. So please feel free!

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At one of our high school class reunions, several of us classmates were discussing which of our teachers had the greatest impact on our lives. It wasn't the coach, as popular as he was. It wasn't the math teacher, even though adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing are part of just about every day we live. No, the teacher who had left the greatest impression on each of us was our English teacher. She was nothing if not thorough. And demanding. I think we diagrammed enough sentences to fill blackboards several football fields in length. And we were assigned what seemed like unending writings from just about every author who ever wrote something in the English language. But still, even if we had sometimes wanted to forget all the work she put us through, most of us agreed that her classes affected our lives more than any other teacher. Of all she taught us, the poem by Robert Frost called "Mending Wall" has probably touched down in my life as much as anything else over the years. The one that begins, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

In the last few days, we read about workmen removing the fence that had been put up around the Capitol building following those terrible and scary events of January 6th. People were cheering as Capitol grounds were opened up again. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." At that same time, I was looking over today's Bible readings and I came across the words we just heard from the Book of Ephesians, chapter 2:

"But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For Christ is our peace...and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...."

The news reminds us often of the wall or fence separating our country and Mexico. Or we think of the wall or fence between Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land. Or of the Berlin Wall. Or the wall in that classic story from the Old Testament, when Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and the wall came tumbling down. When I read this lesson for today, and came to those words about Christ Jesus who "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility," I was reminded of that opening line in the poem "Mending Wall." The one that reads: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." And what stopped me in my tracks was – "That's true of God, too."

Robert Frost's wall idea comes from a routine chore that was to be done on New England farms every Spring, where properties are separated by a low wall made of stacked-up fieldstones. After winter freezes and spring thaws, stones that came loose had to be picked up and restacked to cover the breaks and gaps. Apparently this was a chore that you and your neighbor decided to do together. You would work on your side of the stone fence, and your neighbor on the other, until the wall between you was complete again. Let me read a few lines of this poem (reading just the **bold** lines):

"Mending Wall"

**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 makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,

But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.

**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..
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes a little more:
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.'
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I build a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out.
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.** I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. 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,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
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.'

As you read and re-read Frost's poem you realize that he is not talking only about stones. The wall that concerns him most is the invisible, personal wall between himself and his Yankee neighbor. The kinds of walls you and I keep building up or running into every day. Walls that shut people out. Walls that close people in.

We want protection from things and people that make life difficult. Then, too, we begin to think that if people found out who we really are they would either laugh or get angry, and we don't like to be ridiculed or get beat up emotionally. Or maybe we just want and need some privacy. "I need my space," we like to say.

But as necessary as some walls are, the problem in the poem is that these two neighbors are building a wall between them that isn't really necessary. We don't have cows that will cross over the property line. My apple trees will never eat the cones under your pine trees. But the neighbor can only concentrate on building the wall and saying over and over, "Good fences make good neighbors." As if building walls and hiding behind them is what it means to be a neighbor.

That line, "Good fences make good neighbors" is so quotable that some probably have lifted that out as a guide for their life. But my English teacher wouldn't let us get by with remembering just that one line. After all, she'd tell us, the poem begins this way: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." But there doesn't seem to be any way the poet can really reach his crusty old neighbor across the wall. And how sad it is when you realize how many and how strong and how high are the walls that separate us from each other. I think of some close family friends in another city. Father and mother haven't spoken to their son in a very long time, nor he to them. I haven't the faintest idea what the source of this alienation is. I often wonder if they really know what it is that has gotten between them. All I know is that it's very sad – for us to watch, to say nothing of the pain it must be for them to live through this hostility. Just think of the pain caused by alienation: women from men, parents from children, husbands from wives, rich nations from poor ones, gay persons from straight, religious right from religious left. Walls don't get there unless we build them, and they don't keep standing unless we build them up again and again.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall." Remember the high drama when President Reagan stood at the Berlin Wall and stated: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" In time, it did come tumbling down. And what had become divided was once again reunited.

What then about the walls that separate people from God? Carelessness, indifference, sin, pride, rebellion, alienation. Ephesians makes one giant wall out of all those different barriers and calls it the "dividing wall of hostility between us." There's something about the Christian faith that doesn't love a wall, either, that wants walls down. We could say that what the whole Bible is about is the love of God in Jesus Christ hammering through all the ancient walls that have shut people in or shut people out. Ephesians puts it this way: "Christ is our peace. He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...so that he, Jesus, might reconcile us to God through the Cross."

That's what the Church in Ephesus was celebrating -- and what we can celebrate here, too! Just imagine what the congregation there must have been like as they sat there and listened to this letter from the Apostle. Here sits a Jew, over there a Gentile. Here a person in fine clothes, there a beggar. Here a Roman centurion, there a person just released from prison. Here a slaveholder, there a slave. Here business people, there some who fished for a living. Here children, there old people. Some local townspeople, some from another part of the world. But together, hearing these life-changing words: "brought near by the blood of Christ." Brought near to God; brought near to each other.

Every last one of them an outsider by someone's definition. And every last one of them an insider by God's definition. People with all kinds of walls around them, but now together because there is "Someone who does not love a wall." God. Someone who took down the wall of hostility forever by his Cross. Jesus. The Christ who knows each one, understands each one, forgives each one, accepts each one, loves each one, gives power for living to each one. As we sing in that old Gospel hymn, "Just as I am, Thy love unknown has broken every barrier down." As we're reminded at every Communion service, the walls have come down "through the body of Christ given for me, and through the blood of Christ, shed for me."

And when we begin to realize that all the ancient walls between us have been torn down, then there is nothing to keep us from opening up and reaching out to each other. We may have once been strangers to each other and to God, but no one has to be a stranger any more...not to God, not to each other. Whether you've been a member here for 20 years or 1, or aren't a member at all – to each one of us here today: "You are not strangers...You are fellow citizens and members of the household of God." God has reached out to us all in love. And God asks each of us to let all the walls of hostility come tumbling down, so that our mission in life can be "to share the love of Christ to the greatest number of people." Amen.