

Sunday 3rd February, 2019
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

As I reflected on this morning's Gospel passage I was left with one main question rattling around in my head - "why did those people listening to Jesus go from being "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (as we are told), to suddenly being filled with rage and trying to hurl him from a cliff!" And I think the answer to this question is this. Initially, as Jesus recites the words of Isaiah, they have nothing to complain about - they agree that Isaiah wrote that the Messiah came for the powerless and the weak and the captive.

But suddenly, Jesus makes it more concrete - he gives examples of how the word of God came to a widow in Zarephath, and to a Syrian leper. And that's the source of the people's rage - because these characters do *not* fit with the people's expectations of whom the Messiah came for. Simply put - these 2 characters are, the people believe, on the other side of the fence that they have built for themselves. The widow in Zarephath, and the Syrian leper are outsiders. Surely, the people believe - the Messiah did not come for *them*!!

But that's exactly what Jesus means. It's as if he's saying "No, when I talk about God coming to free the oppressed and bless the poor, I'm talking about God blessing the people you can't stand, the people you don't want to be near, the people you think are your enemies." And so he reminds them of a couple of stories where God blessed not Israel, but Israel's enemies. And then they're mad, so mad that they're ready to get rid of this so-called prophet. This sermon in Nazareth is only the beginning of the division that his words, and eventually his church, will provoke.

This issue reminded me of Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" and, in particular, it's most famous line: "Good walls make good neighbors." While that line is perhaps well known to many, it's easy to forget that the whole of Frost's poem is written to challenge that very assertion.

Two farmers are out for their spring ritual of replacing stones that have fallen from the wall separating their two properties. One, the voice of the poet, keeps wondering why they need walls at all: "My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him." To which his neighbor responds with the signature line. But the poet isn't persuaded, "I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head: / 'Why do they make good neighbors? And then the poet continues, naming a truth that runs before the poet all the way back to Jesus day and from him up to our own debates about walls and borders: and he 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."

Jesus, it seems, sides with the poet on this one. Indeed, it's his dislike of walls that gets him into so much trouble during his first sermon and, eventually, will see him crucified. Jesus' audience, you see, would agree with the farmer that says, "good walls make good neighbors." Walls, after all, keep you safe, mark off important boundaries, and keep less-than-desirable things at bay, whether wolves from your sheep, a hostile neighbor from your home, or fear-inducing refugees from your homeland. No wonder so many then and now think good walls make good neighbors.

But Jesus disagrees. When you live into your identity as one of God's beloved children, you see, there's no more need for walls to keep the enemies out because there are no more enemies. Walls - and with them all of the ways we define, describe, and bracket out the "other" - are completely unknown in God's kingdom purposes.

I know that's hard to hear. And even harder to live. Indeed, it can feel like nothing more than pie-in-the-sky sentimentality. After all, we live in a fearful and dangerous world where walls and locks and laws seem absolutely necessary to keep us safe and bring a modicum of peace and order to word. In this life, perhaps good walls really do make good neighbors.

Perhaps. But perhaps we also fall prey too easily to a deep-seated insecurity that marks the human race and prompts us to overestimate risk, to fear those we don't know instead of welcoming them, and to resort to violence far too quickly when we feel at risk. And even if there are times or circumstances when we'd agree that good walls make good neighbors, can we at least test that proposition before enforcing it. Because here's the thing; the hard thing about the God we know in Jesus is that whenever you and I draw a line between who's in and who's out, we will inevitably find Jesus on the other side.

If there is one line that sums up the Jesus we discover in Luke's account, it's this: God came to redeem everyone. When we focus on "redeem," it's good news. When we focus on "everyone," and call to mind those we believe have done us wrong...or who frighten us...or who are different...or who seem unnatural... that same line is terrifying. In being drawn back into God's love we lose all claims as to why we deserve something (and presumably others do not), as we recognize that the word "deserving" - like walls - simply has no place in the kingdom of God.

We live in a walls-obsessed age, yet our call is to put a notion into our hearts and our imaginations, to question whether we need them, whether God wants them, whether we will find our ultimate security in building higher walls or by falling freely into the hands of a merciful and loving God who, time and time again, showed that "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Let me finish with a story told by a body called the Parent's Circle, a grassroots organization for Palestinians and Israelis who have lost loved ones due to the seemingly endless conflict in the Holy Lands.

This true story is of two fathers, a Palestinian and an Israeli, who had both lost daughters because of the ongoing conflict between their nations. They were discussing with a group about the conflict and about life before and after the Separation Wall, built in the West Bank of Israel, and one of the fathers said this: “No wall, not matter how high, can stop two kinds of people, one, a determined suicide bomber and the one determined peacemaker”.

The two fathers told how each went through their own moments of wondering how life could possibly carry on given the death of their children due to such senseless, mindless fighting. They told how they could have chosen revenge to ease their pain but instead realized that the only way forward was to talk to each other.

And in each other, they found the way to carry on because, in their words, “our blood is the same color, our tears are just as bitter.” They found a way to carry on that chose peace instead of revenge, conversation instead of fear, life instead of death because they said “it is not our destiny to kill each other in this Holy Land.” At stake for both fathers was peace. Simple as that. This is the gospel. This is love.

Let us be honest about the walls we have built in our own lives and in our church - and about those walls that we may not have built but that we are perfectly content in continuing to hold to. Because our God does not wish for walls - but rather, our God seeks to redeem - everyone...

Amen.