

Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
September 15, 2013

Ephesians 2:8-22, Luke 15:1-10  
“Walls”

The gospel text today is from the lectionary and the Ephesians passage is one I chose to go more specifically with the theme of my sermon. The subject of the sermon is “walls.” It is the third in a series of sermons I’m giving on how God was present to me during our recent vacation in Germany and England with side trips to Belgium and Scotland.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out the connection with the first text which is one of unity. Jesus breaks down dividing walls of hostility, in this case between gentile and Jewish believers in the day.

It is one of the rare passages in scripture where walls are spoken of in this way. For the most part, walls are literal: Walls of ancient cities and homes built for protection and safety; walls as enclosures for animals; and walls of buildings like the walls of the temple.

The gospel passage is tangential but central as well. Jesus tells many stories about sheep and shepherds. Not much is known about Jesus before he began his ministry but we do know he was familiar with sheep, as one would be in rural Palestine. He was also a self-taught scholar of the Torah.

Suellen and I traveled a number of country roads in England and Scotland and we saw a billion sheep in many fields and most the fields had stone walls. There’s something very beautiful about a lush, green English or Scottish meadow dotted with hundreds of sheep and surrounded by low-lying, black and brown stone walls.

While these walls enthralled us there were other walls on our trip that interested and disturbed us. The Hadrian Wall in northern England was historically interesting in the way it was built and that it was the furthest north the Romans marched around the time of Christ.

The most disturbing wall was the Berlin Wall. Suellen had gone through the wall at Checkpoint Charlie back in the day with five school teachers. Their car was thoroughly searched inside and outside, top and bottom on the way in and when they came out.

The wall still stands in sections throughout Berlin and in one part it is painted with amazing murals of other places in the world where walls are equally disturbing. Those highlighted were the walls separating Israel and Palestine, Protestant and Catholic Belfast, USA and Mexico, and North and South Korea.

Implied in all these is the kind of hostility spoken of by Paul in the epistle passage today: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

We were told by our German friend that Christians took this passage to heart in both East and West Germany during Communist control of East Germany. While churches in the east were being observed by the State security police, called the Stasi, the pastors still spoke prophetically and the churches were packed to the brim. Much of former East Germany sits in the heart of Protestant Reformation country.

We visited a magnificent tall-steeple Gothic-type church in the beautiful town of Tanger-Munde on the Elbe River. It had seats for over a thousand people and was constructed with solid wood, mosaic and stained-glass windows.

Our German friend who led the music during one of summer worship services here about two years ago said he smuggled clothing disguised as costumes for drama performances to the churches at the time. It was very risky.

The churches in East Germany are not as full nowadays and I asked my friend why this was the case. He said that during Communist rule the people needed a sanctuary and a message of liberation and a place where they could covertly organize for a new united Germany. Now that they are liberated, they have become more consumerist and less in need of Christ. This reminds me of the Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3) In other words, blessed are those who know their need of God, for theirs is the realm of heaven.

Another Beatitude ties in directly with the epistle text today and that is, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9). It is God's desire communicated strongly by Paul and Jesus that we do all in our power to break down walls of hostility and affirm peace in our world.

In reflecting on this sermon today, I happened to hear the US American classic song, "Don't Fence Me In." The words resonated:

"Oh, give me land, lots of land under starry skies above  
 Don't fence me in  
 Let me ride through the wide open country that I love  
 Don't fence me in  
 Let me be by myself in the evenin' breeze  
 And listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees  
 Send me off forever but I ask you please  
 Don't fence me in

Just turn me loose, let me straddle my old saddle  
 Underneath the western skies..." etc.

The song recalls the westward movement and freedom from political and religious hostilities and the confines of Europe. It is mythic and ties into the US American psyche. It is well articulated by Robert Frost in his amazing poem "Mending Wall." In the poem he recounts how he and his

neighbor meet every spring on either side of their wall to mend it from with stones that have fallen or removed by hunters during the year.

Frost questions the necessity of the wall when he has apple trees and his neighbor has pine trees. His apples are not going to eat his neighbor's pines, he writes. If they had cows it would be a different matter. His neighbor's reply is the famous line, "Good fences make good neighbors" but Frost would have none of that. There has to be a good reason for wall and he reiterates throughout the poem that "something there is that does not love a wall." It's the something that loosens and topples the stones throughout the year.

The something for Frost is much deeper and one can easily see that something as God. Yes indeed, good fences make good neighbors sometimes in certain cases as many know who own houses. But deep down, especially when it comes to relational matters, when it comes to walls that protect rigid ideologies and arbitrary borders that separate families from families that cause hostility and strife, then those walls must come down. There has to be a good reason for walls as there are better reasons for there not to be walls.

Frost knows that, Paul knows that, Germany knows that, and Jesus knows that.

The final question for us is what are the walls in our lives that need to be removed and in Christ toppled forever? What are the walls of hostility that need to come down? It can be one's refusal to accept someone of a different race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion; it could be one's brother/sister, mother/father, son/daughter, any family member one has become alienated with over the years fully realizing that there some separations that are healing and healthy; it could be nation with nation as one sees with the US and Syria fully realizing that much is blurred in propaganda; and it could be one's hostile relationship with animals in abusive farming and one's disregard for planet earth.

Paul was right when in a different context but with the same universal principle when he wrote that Jesus Christ has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...thus making peace and reconciling us to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him we have access in one Spirit to God.

It is our task to discern in Christ what walls in our life and community and country and world need to stay up and what walls need to come down as we relate authentically to God in Christ and then we do everything in our power to remove unhelpful walls for Christ's sake and our own well-being. Amen.