

“Something There Is That Doesn’t Love a Wall”

A sermon by David Barker

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Scripture: Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

In order to sell our Austin home and move here to Longmont, I had to tear down walls...two walls, to be precise...tear down two and then rebuild one

- we’d converted our garage to home office space: front half of the garage, Terry...back half, David
- a wall between the two, and a wall where the garage door used to be...
- and because we’d cut an opening for a new door in an interior wall of the house into Terry’s half of the garage, *that* wall had to be rebuilt
- our realtor, for some reason, seemed to think that a buyer of our house might actually want to be able to park their car in the garage, so the work had to be done

It was *not* a small job...as such, it gave me time to think...

- to think about *walls* which, I must tell you, is *not* something I usually do...not, that is, unless I have to paint one or, not surprisingly, tear one down
- it occurred to me that walls define so much more than space
 - space they do define...that’s your space, this is my space...but they are also surprisingly emotional
 - the very walls that define my space, my home, also separate me from, place a barrier between me and the next door neighbor
 - a welcome barrier, in the case of our Austin home, because the guy who lived next door to us was, not to put too fine a point on it, a jerk
 - but they were also the walls that enclosed and protected my children...the walls holding their photographs and their artwork...walls that, when Christopher and Jessica are not there still, somehow, speak their names
- made, though they are, of sheetrock and wood, these walls do so much more than hold up the roof and keep out the cold...mean so much more than can be measured with a tape measure
 - this side of the wall, it’s us, with all “us” means...that side of the wall, it’s them...this is home...this is *ours*

And what's true emotionally is equally true geopolitically

- the Berlin wall, Hadrian's wall, the Jerusalem wall, the Great Wall of China, the wall some would build along our border with Mexico...
- us and them...walls, part and parcel of our very identities...they keep things out, they keep things in...in our homes, in our heads, in our hearts

Robert Frost wrote a poem called *Mending Wall*

- in the poem, a wall separates two farms...a wall that, every year, must be mended
- mended, because every year parts of it fall down...the frozen earth juts upward in winter, then shrinks back in the warmth of the summer sun, and the rocks fall
- mended, because, as one farmer tells the other, "good fences make good neighbors"
- and so the two farmers, each on his own side, work their way down the wall, repairing places where, over the course of the months, the wall has collapsed

- good fences may indeed make good neighbors, or at least deal with neighbors who are jerks, but one of the farmers begins to wonder: maybe there's something about walls that somehow isn't *right*
- maybe, the farmer wonders, nature doesn't agree with him and his neighbor that the walls should remain intact...maybe doesn't agree that good fences make good neighbors after all
 - something there is, he wonders aloud, that doesn't love a wall

I've been thinking about that, too...important as walls are, it's true: nature doesn't make walls...humans make walls...nature only knocks them down

So, I wonder...maybe this something that doesn't love a wall is *God*

- there are walls in Scripture, true enough, and some of them built on God's instructions
- some of them, in fact, seem to be integral to God's plan...sometimes literally, as in Nehemiah rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem
- sometimes metaphorically, as in the setting apart of the Chosen People
 - a single individual—Abraham—chosen as patriarch of a single people, taken by God and set apart, to live and act and think differently...to be to God what no other people would be
 - other people might end up occupying the same space as the Chosen People, might interact with them...sometimes even conquer them, but other people will never be the *Chosen People*
 - as if there was a wall: Chosen People here...everybody else there
- and if it was true of the Chosen People as a whole, it became equally true of that small group of Chosen People who became the first Christians
 - believers that Jesus is the Christ here, nonbelievers there

Or so it seemed...until the day Peter and a Roman centurion named Cornelius each had a vision

- Peter's vision came not once but three times...a great, white sheet descending from heaven, unfolding to reveal all manner of food no Levitical law-abiding member of the Chosen People would dare eat
 - and with the vision came a voice: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean"
- Peter, foremost among the chosen, is suddenly commanded to eat food only consumed by those *not* chosen...so he was, understandably, confused
- Cornelius, a Gentile who believed in the God of the Jews...his vision was a good deal less confusing, yet still a vision: God wants you, Cornelius, to contact someone named Peter
 - the same Peter to whom Jesus said, "Blessed are you among men...on you I will build my church"
- Cornelius acts on his vision, meets Peter, and in that meeting, Peter's confusion about his own vision disappears
 - instead, Peter gains a profound understanding...something about God, and, in the process, something about walls
- it was against Jewish law for a Jew even to associate with a Gentile, let alone visit one in his home
 - that particular wall would not fall
 - but then Peter visits Cornelius and there, in Cornelius' home, preaches the first sermon of the post-resurrection church to Gentiles
 - the sermon we read a portion of a moment ago
 - and having preached, Peter then baptizes Cornelius and his entire household, and they—*Gentile...not* chosen...*there* not here—receive the Holy Spirit

One sermon, one baptism, and the wall that would not fall, did: God's promises to the *Chosen* People became what, in fact, they were intended to be all along...promises to *all* people

- Christianity would no longer remain a small sect within Judaism but a movement destined to encompass all creation
- and apart from Peter's sermon and Cornelius' baptism, you and I likely would not be in this sanctuary this morning...because there'd still be Chosen People on one side of the wall, and everybody else, including you and me, on the other
- but instead, in the words of the Apostle Paul:

God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will...

Yet look at what we've done...Christians, people who once were "there," and but for the grace of God through Jesus Christ could've remained "there" ...we Christians, recipients of the grace of the wall that fell...look at the walls we've built

- walls between ourselves and other Christians...between ourselves and people of other faiths...between ourselves and those who don't believe...between, even, ourselves and one another
- the frozen earth bolts upward in winter, shrinks back in the summer sun...the rocks fall... and, because we, too, are seemingly intent that good fences somehow make good neighbors, we once again work our way down the wall, each on our own side, filling every hole we find
- instead, maybe we, too, should be wondering if, indeed, there's something about walls that somehow isn't *right*

Which brings us, I think, to this particular Sunday of the liturgical year...Baptism of the Lord...the Sunday we consider the baptism of Jesus

- and the question this Sunday always brings: why did Jesus, of all people, need to be baptized?
 - being without sin, what did baptism do for him?
 - even John the Baptist puzzled, insisting that he shouldn't be baptizing Jesus but that Jesus should be baptizing *him*
 - but Jesus is clear: "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness"
 - if the reason Jesus is baptized is to *fulfill all righteousness*, then what exactly does that mean?
 - we can return to God's Chosen People
 - throughout the OT, prophets speak of God's desire that God's Chosen People work for *justice*, which meant work to create life in conformity to God's will
 - and, the prophets said, as justice grows, righteousness will prevail
- Jesus being baptized to fulfill all righteousness means, therefore, he is baptized to bring about justice, and *that* means life lived in absolute obedience to the will of God
 - but the obedience in question is not Jesus'
 - in being baptized, Jesus is, as he always was, being obedient to his Father's will
 - but the obedience in question is ours...because Jesus' baptism was not about Jesus...it was about *us*
 - Jesus was baptized and, ultimately, crucified, that you and I...all creation...might be made clean, might receive the Holy Spirit, might live our lives as Jesus lived his: in obedience to God's will

And, thus, the reality that maybe, indeed, there's something about walls that somehow isn't right

--if, in choosing us, God sets us apart, erects, as it were, a wall...it's not to exclude others but to delineate where you and I are when we are living obediently, living righteously

--it's the walls *you and I* erect...the ones that define who's in and who's out, that we're here, others are there...the walls we seem so intent on mending no matter how often they crack and tumble...about *those* walls something there is that doesn't love them

--the something that doesn't love them is God

The two walls I tore down in our house back in Austin...and the one I built...

--I quickly discovered that *building* a wall is a fairly clean undertaking...especially if you're just filling-in an opening

--but tearing walls down...that's a messy, dirty job...your hands get filthy

--maybe that's why we so often avoid really doing God's work