

BREAKING DOWN WALLS

Pentecost 8 Year B

2 Sam. 7:1-14a; Ps. 89:20-37; Eph. 2:11-22; Mk. 6:30-34, 53-56 Gladstone 18/07/2021

“Alienation” is a popular word in contemporary society, today. We see alienation in terms of young people who are disillusioned with today’s political system and its economy, who are hostile toward the establishment. We see alienation in terms of race, colour, religion and creed. Alienation is all around us. We only have to pick up our newspaper or turn on our television sets to see the extent to which certain people or groups of people feel alienated from one another and the rest of society.

It was Karl Marx who popularized the word, having himself taken it from a German Theologian. Marx understood the plight of the masses in terms of economic alienation and this, according to him, was the basis of the class struggle. I’m not too sure that very many people today would consider his way of addressing the problem as being particularly appropriate.

Nowadays the word is used more generally of a person’s alienation from his or her due reward or from the exercise of power, especially in being able to make decisions. We see this today in the many and various minority groups who, sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly, strive to be heard above the much louder voice of the majority. Alienation describes a sense of dissension with what is, and partly a sense of powerlessness to change it.

But long before Marx, the Bible spoke of human alienation. It describes two other and even more radical alienations than the economic, political or social. One relates to our alienation from God our Creator, and the other to our alienation from one another, our fellow creatures. Nothing destroys our humanity more than this breakdown of fundamental human relationships, brought about very often by pride and fear.

For people as technologically advanced as we are, we really haven’t learnt all that much about how to deal with these kinds of concerns. We can put people on the moon, but we can’t seem to cause them to get along together. Heart transplants are commonplace, but hearts of compassion are growing increasingly rare. Instead of tearing down the walls of hostility between us, we have been erecting them with ever more care.

Why do we do that? Do we think these walls help us? We must, for we certainly spend a great deal of effort building and mending them. Robert Frost wrote a poem entitled “Mending Walls.” The poem is about the spring ritual of mending stone fences in New England. He describes how two neighbouring farmers would meet to gather the stones that have fallen off the walls during the winter and put them back in their place. They

have done this for years. It has no meaning, since there are pine trees on one farmer's land and apple trees on the other's. But, it's a tradition. In this poem we see two forces at work. One is the force that wants to break down walls. Frost writes:

*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.*

In other words, there seems to be some kind of invisible force that has knocked the stones off the wall. There is something that wants the wall down. This is the first force, that Frost talks about. But there is another force or attitude, which opposes it. The poem continues with one farmer addressing the other.

*My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."*

"Good fences make good neighbours." That's his reasoning for continuing with the wall between their properties. But is it true? Well, I guess we have to believe it, because we have certainly spent a great deal of effort to build and repair the fences we build up between each other.

When we take a close look at human history, we discover that human beings are very good at building walls. We build them everywhere—the ancient wall of China, the Berlin wall, city walls both ancient and modern, walls around our yards. Then there are other kinds of walls—walls of race, creed, class and religion. And then there are the emotional walls that we build around ourselves—walls of hurt, walls of pride, walls of fear.

Let's face it, we're comfortable with walls—we like them. Walls make us feel safe—they protect us. Even here, the walls of the church give us a sense of security, shielding us from the evil influences of the outside world—enabling us to get into our holy huddle to worship God without the challenge of the world's needs affecting us too much. But we need to take care. Walls may feel good and comfortable and secure for a while, but they can become a prison. And, within us, there is also a sense in which we want to tear down those walls—to be able to become vulnerable, as we know the gospel calls us to be.

What are the walls that you have built around yourself—the walls that prevent you from being able to fellowship with one another and with God, the way you know you ought—walls of doctrine, ideology, race, culture, prejudice, upbringing? Jesus came into this

world and died on the cross to remove these dividing walls, to reconcile, to draw near all who were once far away.

Our text today deals, on one level, with the hostility between Jew and Gentile. It's no secret that not a lot of love transferred between Jews and gentiles. To the Jews, there were only two classes of people—Jews and Gentiles. To be a Jew was to be one of God's chosen people—to be part of the "elect". To be a Gentile was to be a heathen dog—worth nothing. In fact, the Jews said that the Gentiles were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. The Jews looked with disdain and contempt at all Gentiles. And, it might be added, that the Gentiles didn't have too many warm fuzzies for the Jews either. Each hated the other.

A dividing wall of hostility had been erected. Paul speaks of this barrier of the dividing wall in verse 14. This wall of hostility found its expression in a physical wall surrounding the Temple. In Herod's Temple there was a wall, which separated the area in which a Jew was allowed and the area designated for the Gentiles. There were inscriptions placed along the wall, which warned the Gentiles to proceed no further. These inscriptions read in part, "Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." Not quite the welcome we might have expected. This dividing wall symbolized the hostility between Jew and Gentile.

But just as Frost described in his poem, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down." Actually, the "something" is "Someone."

It's only through Christ that the walls of fear and prejudice can come down. Christ came to break down the walls that divide us. Through Christ's work on the cross, those who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. When Christ came He made Himself the basis for peace. No longer is our relationship to God to be based on a person's birthright or on adherence to particular rules and regulations. He has abolished these things by His death on the cross. Now, both Jew and Gentile alike can come to Him, that in Himself He might bring unity, thus establishing peace.

This peace is not based on our heritage, our performance, or the colour of our skin. Our text reveals that He Himself is our peace. We are also told that through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

This is what God has done—not only for the Jew and Gentile, but for us as well. He has brought us to a place of reconciliation—with each other and with God. He desires to make us into a new humanity, based upon new life in Christ. In the eyes of God here

are now no divisions that are to be based on race, nationality, age, education, sex, or culture. In Christ the barriers are down. The wall has been dismantled.

Frost remarks in his poem,

*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out.*

Walls can be used for two purposes: They can be used to keep something out or they can be used to keep something in. They can be used to keep people away from knowing us as we really are. Maybe we're afraid that if people knew us as we really were, they wouldn't want to know us at all. So, we build walls around us to keep others out. We also build them to keep in our hurts and our fears. Who or what are you walling in or walling out?

In building our walls, however, we must be careful not to wall out the presence of Christ, and not to wall yourself in and find you have built your own prison of prejudice. Christ has come to set us free. Christ has come to make us one. Jesus came into this world and died on the cross to remove the dividing walls, to reconcile, to draw near all who were once far away.

There are several things that can get in the way of pulling these walls down—pride, selfishness, bitterness, fear, feelings of inferiority. While ever we think we are better than someone else—while ever we need to possess—while ever we hold a grudge—while ever we want to hold on to our fears and do not give them up to God—while ever we believe that we are hard done by—then we will continue to build for ourselves walls—walls that over the years will grow broader and higher and much harder to pull down—walls that separate us from each other and from God. If we want to build the church, we need to tear down the walls that separate.

Jesus has come tear down these walls and to make peace. He has come to bring us together in Himself. Are there walls that you need to tear down today? Are there attitudes that you need to surrender to his love and mercy today? Christ has come to set us free.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.