

BUILDING BRIDGES, NOT WALLS

TEXT: Luke 4:21-30

The passage we just heard from Luke always reminds me, for some reason, of Robert Frost's poem "Mending Wall" and in particular it's most famous line: "Good walls make good neighbors". While that one line is well known to many, we may not all realize that the whole of Frost's poem is written to challenge that 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? Isn't it / Where are the cows? / But there are no cows."

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 heated debate about walled borders. "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 offense / Something there is that doesn't love a wall. / That wants it down."

I think Jesus would probably side with the poet on this one. Yes, it's a dislike of walls that gets him in so much trouble during his first sermon and, eventually, will send him to the cross. Why do you suppose Jesus' sermon provoked such a violent response from his hearers in the synagogue? Well, after reading lines from Isaiah promising release and redemption and healing for those who have been cast off by the world, his audience seems well pleased by his words, even proud of the hometown boy made good. But then Jesus presses on. "No", it's as if he's saying, "When I talk about God coming to free the oppressed and bless the poor, I am 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. Then they're mad, so boiling mad that they are ready to get rid of this so-called prophet.

The folks who were listening to Jesus in the synagogue would undoubtedly agree with the farmer who 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 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. My goodness, the central promise of our country's leadership is precisely to build a huge wall between this country and our neighbor to the south. But Jesus disagrees. When you live into your identity as one of God's beloved children, 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 antithetical to God's kingdom purposes.

Now let me tell you another story. Two brothers living on adjoining farms fell into conflict after 40 years of working together. It began with a small misunderstanding, grew to a major difference, and finally exploded in an exchange of bitter words, followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on the older brother's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there that I could help with?"

"Yes," the brother said, "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm; that's my younger brother! Last week, there was a meadow between us, but he took his bulldozer and dug a creek between us. I'm going to do him one better. See that pile of old timber. I want you to build an 8 foot high fence between us so I can't see his farm or his face anymore." The carpenter said, "Show me the nails and the tools, and I'll do a good job for you."

The older brother went to town for the day. When he returned at sunset, his eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. There was no fence at all. Instead, the carpenter had built a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other, handrails and all!

His younger brother came toward then with an outstretched hand. “You’re quite the guy,” he said, “after all I’ve said and done.” The two brothers met in the middle of the bridge, and shook each other’s hand. When they saw the carpenter leaving they said, “Wait! Stay a few days. We have other projects for you.” “I’d love to,” the carpenter said, “but I have many more bridges to build.” I think the carpenter of Nazareth might well agree.

On some intrinsic level, I think that we are all called – whether by God, some higher power, or the human condition – to be bridge-builders. We are driven, in some deep spiritual way, to want to connect, to build bridges – in our families, social circles, communities and workplaces, with the natural world and the spiritual world; with others and even within ourselves.

But bridges aren’t built when we stand our ground and stay in our comfort zone; they aren’t built when we focus on relationship maintenance, rather than relationship sustenance. Bridges aren’t built in the masks or by pretending that we aren’t scared and confused. Bridges aren’t built when we snicker at the expense of another, when we think in terms of “us-them” and “the other”, or when we focus on all the ways we are different.

Bridges are built when we cast a wide net, when we make the effort, when we are radically inclusive. Bridges are built when we ask questions and take the time to listen to the answers. Bridges are built when we lay ourselves bare and stumble through the muck; when we make an intentional and difficult decision to forgive; when we focus on our shared and common human condition. Brides are built when we step into the heart and mind of someone else; they are built with a single phone call or an email, with a tender touch, with an open mind and a generous heart.

Just a week or so ago, Pope Francis met with more than 150,000 young people meeting in Panama for World Youth Day. He said to them, “builders of walls sow fear” and “divide people”. Back in 2016, the Pope had noted, “A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the gospel”.

Perhaps we 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? So when we lock the doors to our church, when I lock the doors to my house at night to feel safe, can I at least do that with a modicum of remorse, knowing this *isn’t* what God intends or desires? 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 find Jesus on the other side.

So let’s be on the side of bridge-building. Yes, it’s hard work. But bridge-building is good work, beautiful work, essential work. Bridge-building is holy human work.

There are bridge-builders all around us, and we can be bridge-builders ourselves, whether we know it or not. There are many people who built bridges for me in my life, and for those I am eternally grateful. Who are the bridge-builders in your life? Amen