

WALLS

Sermon by Rev. David J. Robb

Sunday, June 21, 2015

All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City

Text: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.

--Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia: 3:28

When you are invited to preach, you do not always have the luxury of choosing a topic and working on it for a relaxed period of time. Sometimes the topic just reaches out and chooses you. That was the case with me this past week. I had earlier determined to speak about anxiety and had pretty much completed preparing my text by the middle of last week—by the way, something of a record for me. That was before Wednesday evening and Charleston and the sad events at the historic Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, or, as it is lovingly known to the residents of South Carolina--“Mother Emmanuel.” What I had written had its own style and integrity. But there was no way that I could fit those ideas into the framework of the horrifying events of the past few days. So yesterday, I decided I would just have to put those thoughts on hold and start over in order to make room to address this most recent heart-breaking event. We clearly have had a series of events like this over the course of the past year, all centered around the terrible persistence of racial ideology that we Americans have never seemed to have reconciled with our deep idealism about equality and human rights. It was what Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish economist rightly named an “American Dilemma” in his book of the same title on this subject published back in 1944. Myrdal rightly predicted that unless the United States faced and sought to eliminate racism forcefully from within our own midst, it would continue to fester as a disease in the body politic and compromise all our efforts to serve as a beacon of hope for the rest of the world. Now some 70 years later, despite some significant progress on the issue, it is clear the work is nowhere near completed.

i

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” That is the way Robert Frost begins one of his most renowned and admired poems, “Mending Wall”—one of the poems we explored together a couple of years ago in an Adult Education series that I was leading on Frost’s poetic and religious imagination. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” And we at first imagine that this “something” he refers to must be some innate aspect of human sensibility. But he goes further:

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.

As a long-time resident of New England, the kind of wall Frost is referring to in this poem is the kind that those of us who like to walk the hills and woods of New England are still

fond of. Our forebears, Yankee farmers, made those walls, and we still marvel at their work—how they painstakingly dug out those stones and set them upon one another. It was a task that served two useful purposes at once: first, to render those fields safe to plow, and second, to set and mark clear boundaries. What the poet observes is that apparently some power or force beyond human purpose—whether force of nature or law of God he refuses to speculate—some power or force *beyond* human purpose seems to resist the construction of these or any wall at all. For nature herself appears in her ever-changing cycle to produce conditions of upheaval—frost heaves and ground swell and thaw—all of which conspire to “spill the upper boulders in the sun.”

And so Frost describes a yearly ritual that he enacts each spring with his neighbor whereby they undertake together to repair the wall, walking in parallel on either side of the structure and lifting in place the boulders that the winter had strewn about. Frost is somewhat playful as he observes that the ritual is little more than what he calls “an outdoor game”—

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Late in his life, in the summer of 1962, Frost made a goodwill tour of the Soviet Union where he visited with other poets and gave several readings of his own work. He was accompanied by a translator, the Russian scholar and professor from Wesleyan University, Franklin Reeve. Many years later Professor Reeve told me that Frost was gratified to learn that his poetry had been translated into Russian and appeared to be widely known and respected in that part of the world. Among the most popular of his works was this very poem, “Mending Wall.” But he was astonished to learn that the Russian version of his poem had entirely omitted the initial line: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” You may remember that this was an era of great tension between the West and the Soviet Union. Winston Churchill had famously accused the Soviets in 1946 of dropping an “iron curtain” between Eastern and Western Europe. And just a year before Frost’s visit the Soviets had assisted East Germany to erect the infamous Berlin Wall. So the only theme the Soviets especially wanted to emphasize at that time was the one articulated by Frost’s neighbor, namely: “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Of course, Frost is not content to leave matters so neatly wrapped up, so he continues to probe a little deeper:

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
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.

(Don’t you love that little pun here—offense). Then he returns to the opening theme:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall
That wants it down.

ii

There is of course something paradoxical about Frost's treatment of these opposing themes—as there always is in much good poetry, and, I would add, as there is in most substantive religious insight. Most of us can probably imagine numerous instances in which we might agree that “good fences” do in fact enhance neighborliness. But in this poem at least I think we are invited to lean more in the direction of trusting an inherent suspicion about artificial boundaries. Perhaps, we think, Frost is really onto something here: there really might be something inherent within the human spirit, perhaps within the very spirit of life itself that “doesn't love a wall.”

Look around us: human beings are inveterate and prolific builders of walls. There are notably the great historical examples: Hadrian's Wall, the Great Wall of China. In our own time there are the thousands of “gated communities” that have erupted everywhere among wealthy communities over the course of the past two or three decades; there is the fence that conservatives keep insisting we must create across the entire southern border of the United States if we are to preserve our “American Way of Life;” and, of course, there is the wall that Israel has erected along its entire border with the occupied territory of the West Bank to provide “security” against an occupied and displaced and dispirited people. But lest we forget, not all walls are visible. Racial pride and superiority is a wall. Sexism is a wall. Social status based on income is a wall. Any belief system that is ordered around the project of making the believer feel superior or more deserving is a wall.

People build walls because they are insecure. They build walls because they believe they provide an illusion of security. In virtually every case those who build walls know with exact precision whom it is they seek to wall in and whom they seek to wall out. But it is extremely rare that any of us ever asks the much more profound and difficult question of Frost's protagonist: “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.” No when it comes to that we are more likely to resemble Frost's neighbor who, clings to a belief that he is quite uninterested in examining. As the author puts it

He moves in darkness as it seems to me;
Not of words only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

iii

I have been reflecting these past few days on the painful history of racial injustice and racial hatred in this country. I have been especially pained, as have most of us here, by recent events that have thrust this history right back here into the present and into our midst once more. I am reasonably sure that most you here this morning can remember where you were when you learned the news that Barak Obama had been elected the 44th President of the United States.

People in my upper west side neighborhood poured out of their apartments and into the streets with a spontaneous celebration such I had never before experienced. Having worked for years in the 60's as part of the civil rights movement, I too was elated and went out to join my neighbors in the celebration. The election of an African-American President had seemed at one time to have been an impossible dream. But the excitement of that moment soon gave way to years of challenges to the President's legitimacy, his citizenship, his religious integrity, his education, and—worst of all—the constant, unmitigated and nasty racial epithets and slurs cast upon this president that never seems to cease and is nothing short of a disgrace.

This issue about walls and what they mean that Frost addresses is also a central theme for many of our religious traditions. I recalled for instance several texts in the New Testament, because this theme about walls and the breaking down of barriers between human beings, this theme of reconciliation between people and between nations is prominent throughout the biblical narrative. It is precisely this theme that stands behind Jesus' succinct summary of the Jewish Torah that he stated in this way: "Thou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself; on this hangs all the law and the prophets" But this is also a critical issue throughout the letters and teachings of St. Paul. Listen once again to these words from Paul's letter to the church in Galatia:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for all have been made one in Jesus, the Christ (Gal 3:28)." Or take this stirring passage from his letter to the developing community in Ephesus: "Now in Christ, you who were far off have been brought near. For he is our peace who has made us all one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility that separates us"

Paul, who was a Jewish convert to the early church, believed that Jesus was the Messiah—in Greek, the Christ—that had been sent by God. He truly believed that in the life and work of Jesus God was doing something transformative in history. But you do not need to believe what Paul believed to be grasped by the power of that to which he is bearing witness. This is a summons to each one of us to be an active participant in the continuing struggle for racial and gender related justice, to be a people committed to the work of God in breaking through and breaking down the walls of hostility that divide members of the human family from one another in whatever guise they may appear.

Let us be clear that what this most recent tragedy reveals is yet again a confluence of interlocking problems that are deeply embedded in our country's DNA. We will not address them if we try to distance ourselves from this truth or by fobbing this event off onto a lone, bitter, deranged and psychopathic individual as the sole problem. The New York Times' editorial page yesterday morning identified this confluence of what it called "some of our nation's most glaring problems," and specified these:

- the empowerment of a steady stream of enraged people exercising their easy access and right to bear arms,
- the odious racism that haunts society's darkest corners,
- and the public's general sense of impotence, as needed solutions are left up to a political system continuously undermined by timorous officials more interested

in their own survival than in the nation's broader welfare.

What is at stake is what many of us have called for for years—an honest public national dialogue about the deep-seated reality, the subtle power, and the long tentacles of racism. But more than that, what is also required is for each one of us as individuals to assess our own attitudes, and to confront the difficult question of what it is that we are being called to do in the present moment to help bring a change to our communities. What is required is that we find the resources of our own courage to undertake a new effort and a renewed commitment toward the healing of our strained relationships with one another, and the healing of our communal ties. As a religious people, as a community of seekers, whatever your personal creed or conviction, let us allow ourselves to be reinvigorated by Paul's words to an early church:

For [God] is the source of our peace who has made us all one, and broken down the dividing walls of hostility that separates us one from the other. . .”

May we take this as our calling, our mission: to bring that vision to fruition in every way possible in our daily lives. Amen.

Now let us pause in silence to remember those nine souls who were killed in Charleston this past week:

Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton
Cynthia Hurd
Susie Jackson
Ethel Lance
Rev. De Payne Middleton-Doctor
Rev. Clementa Pinckney
Tywanda Sanders
Rev. Daniel Simmons
Myra Thompson

May they rest in peace, and their peace stir us to unrest. Amen