

Sermon

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Sirach 35:12-17, Psalm 84:1-6, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, Luke 18:9-14

Church of the Incarnation

“Happy are the people whose strength is in you! Whose hearts are set on the pilgrims’ way. For those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, for the early rains have covered it with pools of water. They will climb from height to height, and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.”

We are all pilgrims. Like ancient Hebrews “longing for the courts of the Lord,” we journey here to confess our sins, to know God’s mercy, to give thanks for our blessings, to accept our gifts to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. We come with burdens of confusion, grief, loss, sadness and anger to lay down, and with gifts of healing, transformation and redemption to receive. We come trusting we belong, that in this spiritual home we belong to God, to one another, and to ourselves.

To many of us, the world today is unrecognizable. In truth, our ancestors, if not we, have been here before. Think of refugees like Noah, Joseph, Moses and the Israelites in Exodus, the destruction of the Temple and Jews banished to Babylon. Their homeland and places where they arrived were unrecognizable. Think of the 12 disciples and believers like Paul who chose to follow the wild man John the Baptist or the prophet, friend and Holy One named Jesus Christ leaving the familiarity of family, home and vocation behind.

Like pilgrims before, we journey led by cloud and by fire, by the wisdom and wild and restless love of God. In today’s Gospel, Jesus provokes the pilgrims of his time and place, among them “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” The Pharisee prays in the Temple thanking God, “I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” The Pharisee is a good man. He is a scholar of scriptures, observant of rules and generous with his wealth. Jesus contrasts him with the tax collector who “was beating his breast and saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” (We’ve all been there.) The tax collector is a good man too—he takes responsibility for his sins. Yet Jesus tells us “this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Unlike the humble tax collector who poured out his heart to God, the Pharisee had built a wall—a wall of self-righteousness that denied God’s mercy, grace and love to all. I spent some time this week thinking of “walls,” and was reminded of a poem by Robert Frost:

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
that sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
and spills the boulders in the sun;
and makes gaps even two can pass abreast.”

I thought of the wall the Pharisee had built in his heart. It was built with the stones of fear—fear of immoral people like rogues, adulterers and tax collectors but also “untouchables” like lepers,

the mentally ill, the blind and the lame. When we are fearful like the Pharisee, it is human to seek like-minded people to separate ourselves, and if that fear is magnified by social media or opportunistic leaders, to build walls of all kinds that divide us (or rebuild old ones as they did in Reconstruction).

Walls...I remember where I was the day the Berlin Wall began. It was in the summer of 1961, and I was sitting in the camp living room on my day off. While the sun blazed through the windows onto the carpet and the noise of joyful, busy campers could be heard outside, I was listening to the radio. The program was interrupted by the news that East Germany would that day divide Berlin in two with a cement block wall topped with barbed wire. Dark clouds covered my heart. Just five years later I crossed CheckPoint Charlie with friends to visit the Bergamon Museum in East Berlin. Soldiers with rifles stood at every intersection. We walked through deserted streets and a desolate historic museum in profound silence and fear. I almost couldn't breathe. I experienced the rule of terror for the first time, terror that tragically so many in this world have known or are beginning to know.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall" yet through history we build good walls to "protect us." Walls guarded the monasteries and early cities of Europe. The Great Wall protected China. Flood gates in New Orleans and dykes in the Netherland guard communities vulnerable to the sea. We erect fences to protect school children and government buildings from criminal incursions. Walls of vaccines protect us from disease and pandemics. Walls confine offenders while they, (at their best) experience restorative justice. Walls of The Constitution of the United States divide the federal government into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial to ensure that no individual or group will have too much power. The wall of The Principle of the Rule of Law guards us from the rule of tyranny and violation of human rights.

That said, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." By God's grace, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down, Daniel escaped the lion's den and Jonah the stomach of a whale, a tomb couldn't hold the crucified Christ, and prison walls wouldn't hold St. Peter. By grace, our wild and restless God will topple walls that deny God's compassion, justice and grace to all people—walls that redline or racial profile and gerrymander. Walls of masked militias pushing back frogs and peaceful resistors. Walls that divide us into "in" and "out," powerful or vulnerable, privileged white or disrespected non-white, favored cisgender or disempowered binary or transgender, U.S. citizen or immigrant, privileged immigrant or an asylum seeker whose TPS or parole has been revoked.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall." I was home listening to the radio when the Berlin wall fell. I ran outside into the sun, leaping with joy.

It is spring mending time, and the poet walks with his neighbor setting "the wall between us once again." He sees:

..."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."

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

...

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."

In the recent Hobart Lecture—a dialogue between Bishop Mariann Budde and the Irish poet-theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama, Bishop Budde said that, if we look upon the pain, suffering and grief of immigrants (and others) in America and say, "This is **not** who we are," we must also sadly admit, "This **is** who we are." We have become, for now, wall builders and wall keepers—shunning not only immigrants but also sick, the disabled, the poor, the elderly, the child needing a vaccine or a school lunch, the woman needing an abortion, the farmer, the doctor and nurse, the librarian, the teacher, the judge who follows the rule of law. As pilgrims today we must ask, "who are we as Christians now? Who will we choose to be and become at this moment?"

To be clear, we know what our wild and restless God is doing. Jesus doesn't wait for winter's freeze to bring down walls of separation among us. He pokes at religious elites with provocative parables confronting walls of hypocrisy. His mercy shatters walls of guilt with forgiveness. Jesus steps courageously through walls of prejudice to heal lepers, a hemorrhaging woman, a man with a demon, a royal official's son, a Syrophenician woman's daughter and restores them to beloved community. Jesus accepts his death on the cross rather than assemble a wall of militia to become a King. He knows the truth that no matter what happens, even death like St. Paul faces so courageously in today's letter, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Wild as the earth freeze in Frost's poem, Jesus breaks down walls we create from God, our better selves, from others, and from God. And we, what will we do?

Be the pilgrim you are. Seek the perfect love that casts out fear, the reconciling love that mends good walls—walls that protect communities with justice, compassion and peace. Vote. Support leaders who exercise what Yale historian Joanne Freeman calls "civic virtue," work for the common good. In her Hobart lecture, Bishop Budde encourages each of us to take small steps into the fearful border spaces that divide us. Clarify for yourself and others what is of inestimable value and worth sacrificial love. Have curiosity about people with whom we might have just a small difference, share stories, for we belong to God and one another. Give gifts to others knowing that you are loved and you belong, for God's wild and restless love is with you always.

"Happy are the people whose strength is in you! Whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way. For those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, for the early rains have covered it with pools of water. They will climb from height to height, and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion."