

9-28-25 Sermon: “Mending Walls, Making Tables” – Luke 16:19-31

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”¹

So begins Robert Frost’s poem, “Mending Wall.” Frost tells the story of two neighbors whose yards are divided by an old stone wall. Over time, the forces of wind, rain, plants, and animals unsettle the loosely packed stones, and they fall away, leaving holes in their stead. So, once a year, these two neighbors meet at the wall that divides them to walk the line and set the wall between them one again.

One of the neighbors, the poem’s narrator, begins to ask questions: “Why do we even *have* this wall?” he asks. “Neither of us have livestock on our property; it’s just apple trees on my side and pine trees on yours. My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under your pines ...” His neighbor replies, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

The narrator persists: “*Why* do good fences make good neighbors? If nature had its way, this wall would be flattened, eroded into nothing. Before I built a wall, I’d ask to know what I was walling in...or walling out.” But his neighbor goes on methodically laying stone upon stone and repeats once more, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

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This morning’s Gospel reading, like Frost’s poem, revolves around two neighbors and a wall. We meet the two characters: a rich man who wears fancy clothes and dines on lavish fare, and a poor man named Lazarus. Lazarus lives outside the rich man’s gate, hoping to catch a discarded scrap of bread, but the rich man pays him no attention. There is a wall separating these two men. They live their whole lives side by side, but we never even hear them speak to one another.

Then both men die, and everything is reversed. Lazarus ascends to heaven, and the rich man descends to hell. Now it is Lazarus who rests in the comfort of Abraham’s bosom and the rich man who is tormented. In life Lazarus was starving, but in death the rich man is plagued by an unquenchable thirst. The parable begins with dogs licking at Lazarus’ sores, but it ends with the flames of the underworld licking at the rich man’s body.

From his agony, the rich man looks up, sees Lazarus, and cries out “Father Abraham! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in the water so that he might come and quench my thirst!”

Interesting...seems the rich man knows Lazarus’ name after all. They never spoke in life, but in death, we learn that the rich man knew Lazarus was there all along.

But it turns out that while everything else has changed, the wall remains. Abraham tells the rich man he’s out of luck, because there is a great chasm fixed between heaven and hell, and no one can cross it. The barrier that the rich man *chose* not to cross in life has been made impassable in death.

In his sermon on this parable, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., points out that we get no indication that the rich man is a particularly *bad* man. Each of these two neighbors is born into his circumstances – the rich man into wealth, and Lazarus into poverty. The rich man doesn’t create the gulf that separates him from Lazarus, but neither does he try to cross it. He accepts that barrier as...just the way things are. The wall allows him to become blind to his neighbor’s suffering.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.”

I’ve seen a few walls in my time; likely, you have, too. About ten years ago, I traveled to Israel and Palestine, where I saw the wall that separates those two nations. The people who

¹ Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall>.

support this wall (largely on the Israeli side) say it exists for security. Those who oppose it (largely on the Palestinian side) say the wall delineates racial segregation and apartheid. Whatever you call it, the wall's purpose is clear: "This is where I belong, and that is where you belong." Barbed wire and concrete, 26 feet tall in some sections, this wall – like the rich man's gate – makes it possible for someone on the Israeli side to go about their day without having to see the conditions in which many Palestinians are forced to live. They do not have to acknowledge the humanness of their neighbors.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall..."

A man named Kevin was on that trip with me, a Presbyterian pastor in Detroit. Kevin said, "We've got a wall like this where I live, too." And he told me about the Eight Mile Wall, a segregation wall in Detroit built in 1940. The wall divides neighborhoods and even a city park, as it marks the line showing where black people were allowed to live, and where the homes were "whites only."

I got to see this wall a few months later. And as I walked up to Eight Mile Wall to get a closer look, I noticed something else that the Detroit wall shares in common with the Israel-Palestine wall: Both are covered in breathtakingly beautiful *graffiti*.

The walls themselves preach division, but the graffiti artists have a different message to proclaim; they refuse to let the walls have the last word. The Israel-Palestine wall is covered with doves and balloons, crosses and hearts, phrases like "Love wins," "We all bleed the same color," and "Jesus wept." British street artist Banksy has even painted several murals on it. Likewise, in Detroit, the wall that once separated black from white is now covered in paintings of civil rights heroes, of people singing on the street corner, and of children of all races blowing bubbles.

On opposite sides of the world, people have looked at these walls separating neighbors and said, "That's not right." And on these symbols of separation, they have painted images of God's Kingdom.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall..."

Friends, what other walls have you seen that divide neighbors from one another? The wall along the US-Mexico border? The so-called 'peace walls' separating Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods in Northern Ireland? Walls drawn by zip codes or school districts, train tracks or barbed wire fences? Even the doorways to our own churches can be walls, when people start deciding that certain types of people are "in" while others are "out."

But we worship a God who doesn't have much use for walls. Ask Joshua and the folks in Jericho; when God gets involved, the walls come atumblin' down.

The narrator in Frost's poem muses, "Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in, or walling out." But I think we already know the answer to Frost's question, don't we?. Because, in the words of Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, every time we draw a line – or build a wall – between ourselves and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it.²

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

Jesus was in the business of breaking down walls and in their place setting...tables. Where walls divide, tables unite...and invite. A wall keeps us from seeing our neighbors, but a table invites us to look into each other's eyes, to stay awhile and hear one another's stories. So I wonder, friends, when we see these walls in our world today, walls that divide people according to race, income-level, nationality, ideology, life circumstance...what can we do to reach across? To set tables instead? Maybe to cover those walls with our own versions of beautiful graffiti?

² Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Crazy, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, (Jericho Books, New York, 2013) p. 57.

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.” That something it, seems, is the very Kingdom of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.