

“Breaking Down the Walls”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

July 11, 2021

*¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands —
¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph. 2:11-22)*

In a 1995 ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court on the doctrine of the separation of powers, two of the justices got into a little side debate over poetry. At issue in the case of *Plaut v. Spendthrift Farm* were the constitutional walls that are intended to keep the branches of our federal government out of each other’s business. Justice Antonin Scalia, who sought to shore up those walls and make them less permeable, quoted the famous line of Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Walls” that “*good fences make good neighbors.*” Although he concurred in the court’s overall judgment, Justice Stephen Breyer was clearly concerned about the wall building that Scalia was doing. Writing his own opinion, Breyer chose to quote another part of that same poem, the first line in fact, which reads “*Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.*” And, as a warning to those who might use the case to draw too hard and fast a rule, he even included a third passage from the poem: “*Before I built a wall I’d ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out.*”¹

If you haven’t read the poem, or if it has been a while, it is worth the quick Google search. The scene is an old stone wall between the pastoral tracts of two New England farmers. As the poem begins, each neighbor is standing on his own side of the wall. As they walk along, they work to replace the stones that had been dislodged by wind and weather. We quickly learn, however, that one neighbor is wondering whether it was worth the effort.

“We don’t need this wall,” he muses. “My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under [your] pines.”

The man on the other side of the wall just keeps bending, lifting, and putting stones back in place. He responds simply, “Good fences make good neighbors.”

“[But] why do they make good neighbors?” the first man asks. “We don’t have cows.”

¹ Linda Greenhouse, “Justices Rule That Congress Overstepped Bounds - Scalia and Breyer Trade Quotes from ‘Mending Wall’” (*New York Times*, Wednesday, April 19, 1995) <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/frost-scalia.html>



His neighbor never looks up. He just keeps hoisting stone after stone. Despite the other farmer's questions, he never stops to wonder what he is walling in or walling out. His is not to question why; he'll repair that wall do or die... and keep repeating the only thing he can think of to say: "Good fences make good neighbors."²

That farmer's not wrong, really. Even the skeptical farmer recognizes that walls can be useful, especially when you have cows. But I find it interesting that the most quoted line from Frost's poem is the one that is challenged from the first verse to the last. While the poem is most often cited to defend the purpose and sanctity of wall-building, that interpretation ignores the truth that there does seem to be a very real part of God's creation that just does not love a wall... that wants it down.

That certainly has not stopped us from erecting them, even in the realm of religion. For example, the ancient temple in Jerusalem was designed with a number of courtyards that surrounded the central Holy Place. The outermost area, also the biggest, was called the Court of the Gentiles. There, Gentile believers could enter the temple grounds and mingle with faithful Jews. But they were not permitted to pass through the Beautiful Gate. Only ritually pure Jewish men and women could pass through that wall into the smaller courtyard beyond. But that was as far as any woman could go. Only law-abiding Jewish men could pass into the even smaller Courtyard of the Israelites. And those men could get pretty close to the throne of God, but of course only the Jewish priests could go into the sanctum itself, that is, if they were on duty to perform the priestly sacrifices. The final barrier was a heavy, intricately crafted curtain erected to separate the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, the seat of God's presence. The only person who could ever pass through that curtain was the one and only High Priest, and even he could only go in there once a year on Yom Kippur to offer the ritual atonement sacrifice.

All of these walls and barriers separated the people of God into classes with varying levels of access to God. Those walls were tended and defended with grave seriousness. We know this because some years ago archaeologists excavating the outermost court wall found an inscription scrawled in the stone that read "Whoever is captured past this point will have himself to blame for his subsequent death."³ No wonder Ephesians speaks of the walls of hostility that divide us as people, even as religious people. Anyone who has been to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in recent decades does not need an inscription to know that there are all kinds of walls dividing God's people, that those walls are defended with constant wariness and plenty of ammunition, and that anyone disregarding or disrespecting those walls does so at their peril.

This brings us to the radical message of Ephesians, which boldly declares that those kinds of barriers no longer apply in the reign of Christ. For "*now in Christ Jesus,*" the letter says, "*you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*" The passage clearly deals with the religious divide between faithful, covenantal Jewish people and the Gentile believers who had been invited in by Christ and the ministry of the church. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul explore this tension in great detail, as the church tried to decide whether strict adherence

² Robert Frost, "Mending Wall" <http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/frost/section3.rhtml>.

³ <https://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/articles/the-dividing-wall-is-gone>

to the law of the Pentateuch would be required for followers of Christ. Much of the debate centered on circumcision, which was, let's face it, a pretty understandable place to start if you were dubious about the law. As in Frost's poem, the debate in the church was whether the wall that had been erected – in this case, the wall of the law that had for thousands of years determined who was a faithful person and who was not – should be vigilantly maintained, or whether the life and passion and resurrection of Christ had eliminated the need for that wall... by showing that it was walling too many people out and keeping too many away from the presence of God. The story of the New Testament shows how this debate ultimately ended in the eyes of the church with a decision that the dividing wall of the law needed to come down.

But this passage in Ephesians suggests that God's wall-busting plan goes farther than the Jewish/Gentile debate over the law. The open-ended language implies that other walls, many of which we have erected ourselves to protect our bodies and spirits from harm, are also being pulled down, year by year, stone by stone, by the reconciling work of Christ.

Every year at Christmastime, biblical scholar Fred Craddock would return to his small west Tennessee hometown. On every visit he made sure to check in on his old friend Buck, who owned a little cafe on Main Street. His tradition was to order a cup of coffee and a piece of chess pie, and Buck would join him in the booth to catch up.

One year, however, Buck changed things up. "Come on," he said to Craddock, "let's go get a cup of coffee."

"What's the matter?" asked Craddock, "Don't you have coffee here?"

"I don't know," Buck said sarcastically; "sometimes I wonder."

So Craddock followed him down the street, and they got a booth in another restaurant. There were not many people in this one. Craddock was still confused about why they were there.

Finally, Buck opened up about what was eating at him. "Did you see the curtain?" He did not look up from his cup of coffee as he spoke.

"Yes, Buck," Craddock answered. "I saw the curtain; I always see the curtain."

"The curtain" was a barrier that had always hung in Buck's restaurant to separate the front half of the café from the back half. It was simple, not unattractive, but its primary purpose was not decoration. You see, white folks came into the restaurant through the front door on Main Street, but black folks came in from an alley in the back, and they knew very well that they were supposed to stay behind the curtain.

"Yes, Buck. I saw the curtain; I always see the curtain."

Buck finally looked up from his coffee with a pained look on his face. "Fred," he said, "the curtain has got to come down."

"Good," Craddock said, "Pull her down!"

"That's easy enough for you to say," replied Buck. "You come in once a year and tell me how to run my business."

"Then leave it up," Craddock countered. He could tell his old friend was in crisis, and he was hesitant to push too hard. Finally Buck said, "Fred, if I take that curtain down, I lose my customers. If I leave that curtain up, I lose my soul!"⁴

⁴ <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/When+the+walls+come+tumbling+down%3A+Ephesians+2%3A11-22.-a0134257562>

I will say again, not all walls are bad, and sometimes good fences do help to maintain neighborly relations. This weekend, for example, as our area was battered by winds and rain, I was grateful for the walls around me and my family that kept the storm out. But other walls – especially the ones that separate us from people -- those are the ones that raise some thorny questions. When we come upon those kinds of walls, before we go lifting and replacing the stones that have tumbled away just to shore up a barrier that has been there so long we've forgotten why it was built in the first place, that is when we need to ask some questions about what we are walling in, and what we are walling out.

Take, for example, the young Elizabeth Barrett. When she decided to marry Robert Browning, they wed in secret because of her domineering father who she feared would disapprove. She was right. As soon as the marriage became known, her father immediately disowned her. The couple left England for Italy, where they lived happily ever after. But Elizabeth never gave up on the possibility of reconciliation. Nearly every week, she wrote her parents letters. Not once did she receive a reply. After ten years had passed, she received a large package in the mail. Inside, Elizabeth Barrett Browning found all of her letters; not one had been opened!⁵ The beautiful contents of those letters are cherished today by the poet's many literary fans, but her own parents – those who had more reason than anyone to cherish them – had labored week after week to lift and hoist the stones of the wall they built between them and their daughter. It makes you think – did they ever pause to wonder what they were walling in... and what they were walling out?

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

If I could add to the poet's words, I would say that there is something *in the heart of God* that doesn't love a wall... especially one that keeps us from accepting and loving the people around us that we fear without reason... people whom we segregate or malign unjustly... people whom we wall out of our hearts to our own detriment. We know that mistrust of walls is close to the heart of God because, in the very moment when Jesus breathed his last, at the exact second that he gave up his spirit, that fancy curtain designed to keep almost everyone out of the Holy of Holies -- that glorious tapestry of fine twisted linen and blue, purple, and crimson yarns, which was hung so intentionally and carefully with clasps of gold⁶ -- was mystically and radically torn in two from top to bottom. As the barrier ripped apart, the earth shook, rocks split in two, tombs were opened, and the presence of God burst out into the world, never to be shut up again.⁷

Yes, even in heaven... especially in heaven... something there is that doesn't love a wall... that wants it down.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁵ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/r/reconciliation.htm>

⁶ Craddock, Fred B. “The Letter to the Hebrews.” *New Interpreter's Bible Series*. Vol. XII. Nashville: Abingdon Press (1998), p. 58.

⁷ Matthew 27:50-52.