

But now in Christ Jesus 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. He 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.

[Ephesians 2:13-15]

Dear people of God and sisters and brothers in Christ in the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

We've been hearing a lot of talk about walls recently.

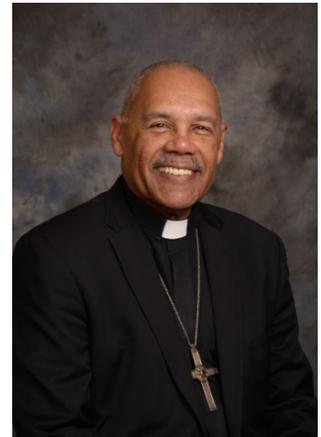
When I was in Arizona for the 2016 Bishops' Academy, we took a trip to Nogales, a border city nearly 70 miles south of Tucson that is the number one commercial Port of Entry in the entire Southwestern United States.

A wall separates Nogales, Arizona from an identically named city, Nogales, in the state of Sonora in Mexico. Erected in the mid-1990s, the wall was built from sheets of interlocking steel that were left over from what the military used to build temporary runways for aircraft.

The Rev. Stephen Talmage, who was Bishop of the Grand Canyon Synod at that time, told us the fascinating history of the city before taking us to the site, where we held a brief prayer service led by our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton.

The area of Nogales is a gateway for commerce between Mexico and the United States. Many years before, people walked freely from one country to the other, considering themselves to be in the same city. So it is understandable that there would be anger about a fence that discourages Mexican shoppers from coming to

the Arizona side and hurts businesses that have seen sales drop because of tighter border security. In addition, the wall has divided families, some that lived in one city but worked in the other.



As I stood along that wall I noticed a lady speaking with another person on the Mexican side. I took a photo which has become somewhat iconic for me. I could only see and hear one side of the conversation. I was overcome with a mixture of sadness and frustration as I wondered why the two had to communicate in this manner. Were they one of those divided families?

Later in the same day we went to St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Nogales to chat with members of that community about the reality of living in a border city. Those discussions also included a member of the Border Patrol.

The agent of the Border Patrol gave us a few aspects of the complicated issue that is immigration. While there are those who denounce a fence, there are also those who are afraid – afraid of terrorism, of escalating violence, a perceived lack of security. They desire increased protection which, they feel, comes from a sealed border.

Most of you who are reading this know of my passion for immigration reform. Welcoming the stranger is the central theme of biblical

hospitality. It is an inclusive hospitality that always makes room for the stranger.

This year, the majority of our Gospel readings will be taken from the Gospel of Luke. On many Sundays we will be hearing any number of parables that teach us to include the poor in our circle of relationships; to be a friend of the poor; to share life with those who are seen as outcasts. We will be challenged to identify with the poor and those who lack social and economic privileges and standing.

And it's not just the Bible or Christianity, but all our faith traditions that share a fundamental belief that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and that we must treat every person with dignity. It is my personal conviction that physical structures, such as walls, stand in symbolic opposition to that belief.

When I hear talk about walls, I am often reminded of a poem by Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," a portion of which states:

*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...*

I am aware that we are not all of the same mind on the issue, which is why I often turn to the letter to the Ephesians for guidance. The apostle Paul, presumed to be the author, was speaking to a divided community. Though the issues were quite different, the hostilities were no less intense.

So my question to anyone who holds differing viewpoints is, can Christ bridge the gap between our differences before they escalate into hostilities? I am convinced that he can. No

one is a stranger to Christ, and no one is ever far from his loving care.

In our life together there are bound to be tensions, there are bound to be anxieties, there are bound to be conflicts. But pain and anxiety is part of the life of people who want to grow in their service and in their relationship to Christ. Do not cut yourself off from one another. Make time for each other, especially for those people with whom you disagree.

Whatever your religious belief, we are all creatures made and loved by God. The challenge to Christians, as well as all people of faith today, is building a future together that includes everyone, not just the privileged. Such action has the potential to transform our society.

May Christ be your peace,



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende

