



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Something That Doesn't Love a Wall

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In our national conversation of the moment, great passion is aroused over the pros and cons of wall-building. Indeed, among those in power, sharp divisions about the morality, utility and cost of a border wall brought a large part of our government to a standstill.

While the shutdown appears over for now, the unresolved debate has made me think about walls-- not only physical walls but barriers of the heart and mind. It's part of the human condition for us to set boundaries that define who we are in relationship to others. But boundaries can easily become barriers, and we need the love and guidance of God to help us honor our individuality while joining in community as God's children.

The talk of walls has put me in mind of a well-loved poem, "Mending Wall" by Robert Frost. It tells of two farmers who meet one spring day on either side of the stone wall that separates their properties. Nature works slowly but steadily to loosen the stones, and the farmers have come to repair the gaps. One says with satisfaction, "Good fences make good neighbors."

As a New Englander I have long admired the imagery of Robert Frost's poems even when their meaning is elusive. At first glance, this poem's message seems to be that "Good fences make good neighbors"-- that reliable borders honor our individuality while promoting peaceful coexistence.

But as a closer look shows, the poet isn't sure that mending the wall is the best thing to do. He knows there is a force working against the wall, and says: "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...." When one farmer says "Good fences make good neighbors" the other wonders "why do they make good neighbors? 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 offence. Something there is that doesn't love a wall. That wants it down...."

The poet does not explain what he means by "something...that doesn't love a wall." He seems to see the wall as an intrusion in creation, resisted by a power that knocks it down, forcing humans to reassess what the wall is for. It's not a religious poem, but a person of faith might see God as the "something that doesn't love a wall" and the Holy Spirit as the force loosening the stones. God treasures our uniqueness and gives us freedom to set borders to define ourselves, yet calls us to overcome the division and isolation that walls can lead to.

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### DATE

Epiphany 3  
Sunday, Jan. 27, 2019

### PREACHER

The Rev. David Griswold

1 Cor. 12: 12-31

Luke 4: 14-21

Robert Frost wrote in 1914 about this tension between selfhood and community. Twenty centuries earlier, our greatest known writer in the New Testament, Paul, also wrestles with this question. He has founded a Christian community in Corinth, one of the major cities of the first-century world— economically and culturally diverse.

But after Paul leaves, barriers of heart and mind have sprung up among the faithful, and Paul knows that if they can't live in harmony, the Jesus movement won't endure. He offers the metaphor of the human body to help them rediscover who they are.

Paul was not the first teacher to use the image of the body to explain how a system functions. Philosophers and politicians used the body to illustrate and reinforce the strict class order which controlled life in the Roman world. The head was the essential part symbolizing those whose power and wealth made them the ruling elites and thus the most important members of society. The hands and feet might symbolize the mundane and supposedly less important functions carried out by those of lower status. The unity of the whole depended on everyone honoring these social walls and staying in their place in the hierarchy.

Paul knows that rank and status govern life in "this world." But now, followers of Jesus have begun to adopt a worldly way of thinking, with competing camps claiming greater worthiness to be leaders. Paul reminds them that they have been baptized into a new identity—the body of Christ-- where the standards of this world do not apply.

Whatever your spiritual gifts happen to be, Paul says, each is equally important in making Christ's body flourish. Foot, hand, eye, ear, head—all are precious in their function yet indispensable to the integrity of the whole. And this body cannot thrive if its members hide behind walls of pride or judgment.

Paul offers not only a teaching for the church but a vision of the kingdom Jesus has come to proclaim. In God's realm, down is up and up is down. "...the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" Paul writes, "...those we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor" (1 Cor. 12: 22-23). His message threatens the cultural status quo. It is as subversive as that force loosening the stones of the wall on the New England farm.

For Paul, the body of Christ is the model for a new society in which borders are porous and everyone regards their own well-being as linked to the well-being of all. "God has so arranged the body...that...the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (24-26). Paul calls us not only to pray for heavenly values to be made visible on earth, but to practice them now in our faith communities and in the world that surrounds us.

I expect many of us have heard or read today's passage before. But one phrase in Paul's letter jumped out at me this week and has weighed on my heart: "I have no need of you." Paul says "the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (21).

Paul reminds us we are interdependent people, and our interdependence is part of God's plan. Most of us have been taught the value of what's known as "self-sufficiency." Yet self-sufficiency is a value espoused not by Jesus but by the world.

Paul insists that in a church whose members live in relationship to Christ, no one can be told “I have no need of you.” The church continues striving to live as Paul teaches, so that everyone’s concerns, gifts and voices help to equip the community to live as Christ’s body in the world. At St. Columba’s, each of us has something important to contribute, and all are needed.

We know that steep walls divide our city and country. The new society imagined in Paul’s message is still far from realized. In baptism, the Spirit anoints us to join with Jesus in carrying the love and justice of God into places where it seems absent. Systems of privilege and human walls of injustice continue to block Jesus’ work. These walls can seem insurmountable even to hopeful people of faith who are impatient with the status quo.

In two weeks we’ll observe “Inspiration Sunday” to reflect about where God is calling us next as a parish. If we could invite Paul to attend, what might he say to us about the challenge of living as Christ’s body in a wall-filled world? I expect he would say: start by looking at your relationship with Jesus. For Paul, our living in relationship with Christ can and must help us to live as interdependent people in every aspect of life.

The prospect of any person or group declaring about another “I have no need of you” seems not only dismissive and callous but wasteful—a squandering of blessings bestowed by God. Jesus calls us into relationship with those who, walled-off in isolation and brokenness, may feel not needed by the world, but whose membership in the body of Christ is vital and life-giving to us.

As we continue and strengthen the ministries that reveal God’s love here and beyond our doors, let us be the “something that doesn’t love a wall.” Let us be like the mysterious force on the New England farm that, one stone at a time, causes walls to crumble. And for all those about whom the world has said “I have no need of you” let us prove the world wrong.

Amen.