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

February 1, 2009 (4th Sunday after Epiphany)

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Psalm 111 Mark 1:21-28

The summer between high school and college, the summer after my father had died, I apprenticed to a stone mason. The master mason, Arnie, had come back from the Vietnam War to Lopez Island and begun building stone walls.

In much of his life, he was never at peace – after fights at home, he'd get on his motorcycle and tear up and down the one main road at 100mph. He had two teenage sons, and a couple dogs chained up in the back yard which he claimed were ¾ wolf.

But when he worked on a wall, a kind of peace settled over Arnie. He'd stand for a quarter hour, and stare at the half-completed wall. Then he'd turn and stare at the pile of rocks we'd gathered from the fields. He'd look the rocks over, until he saw the one that would fit just right, the one stone the wall needed at that moment. I'd carry the stone over for him, and he'd set it down onto the wall, and the stone would look like it had always been there.

A good wall can be a beautiful thing, a work of art. But sometimes walls can be just plain foolishness. Robert Frost wrote about the needless wall between him and his neighbor:

There is where 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.'[1]

It's a sentiment that Jesus encountered again and again, as he wandered homeless through Galilee, crossing through fields, crossing over boundaries of culture and race, gender and denomination.

You can't break bread with *those* sinners. You can't heal the sick on *this* day. You can't criticize the Roman authorities like *that*. You can't say such things about the priests and scribes. You can't treat women, and gentiles, and lepers as if they were your friends! *Good fences make good neighbors.*

But Jesus was no lover of walls – there was never a wall that he met, that he did not try to break; and when he crossed the wall between life and death, he broke that wall down as well.

So when Jesus and his few disciples walk into the synagogue – just the four fishermen, following the carpenter's son from Nazareth – and begins teaching not as a scribe reading sermons from a book, but as if he had *direct* authority, as if he had been there when Isaiah penned his words of prophecy, as if he had been there when his namesake Joshua blew the trumpets against the city of Jericho, well, the walls came tumbling down.

The powers and principalities, the demonic, the proud, the possessed and the powerful all began to cry out. They would cry out against him as he healed the sick, as he forgave the fallen, as he fed the hungry and touched the unclean. They would cry out against him in the voices of enemies, and sometimes in the voices of

[1] Robert Frost, 'Mending Wall' *published in* North of Boston, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915.

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friends: *Good fences make good neighbors.*

And when he began to tear down that wall that humanity had built between ourselves and God they said, "We know where this rejected stone should go; if he won't fit into a wall, we'll fix him to a cross." And that last wall he broke down more thoroughly than the first.

This Epiphany season, as we journey towards Lent, we are invited to follow Jesus as he tears down those walls.

It's an unsettling life: Paul, in his convoluted complicated way, writes to the Corinthians about how hard it is to live like Christ, living without walls: "*But take care that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block to the weak.* "

Paul knows that Christ has torn down the old wall that would have prevented him from eating meat sacrificed to idols – often the *only* meat available in poorer gentile towns. *And* he knows that if he eats that meat, some of his fellow Christians will be terrified that he's become a pagan. So he'll stick with his pita bread and lentil soup, choosing love over knowledge, compassion over theological pride.

Paul embraced freedom, and then struggled to create communities that were free in Christ, fully open to God. He know that there are walls in our life that keep us safe -- I don't believe God calls us to anarchy. But I also believe that God calls us to only one rule, the life of Christ.

The walls that we have built between each other, and between ourselves and God – Race and class, gender and sexuality, citizenship and denomination; our own hearts hemmed in, convinced we are unworthy of God's love, convinced that our souls must be walled up, lest the apple trees escape and eat the pine cones – those walls are being torn down every time we open our heart in prayer, every time we break bread together and gather around this altar.

When those walls are old, when stones of fear and pride have been set for generations, they can be painful to move:

...I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me~
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

When those walls are old, when stones of fear and pride have been set for generations, they can be painful to move.

But when we let Christ bring those walls down – when we are freed from everything that separates neighbor from neighbor, freed from walls that keep us blind to injustice and oppression, freed from walls that try to separate us from the love of Christ – what wonderful freedom we find!

What a blessing it is to walk the open fields with Christ, who never let fear or hatred close him in, who taught with authority because he taught with love.

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