

## **Rev Rita Message Sept 5 2021**

Robert Frost was a twentieth century American poet who wrote many poems about rural life in New England. One of my favorites is called “Mending Wall”. Written in 1914, it involves two rural neighbors who one spring day meet to walk along the wall that separates their properties and repair where needed. In the poem, Frost questions the need for such a wall in the first place. And the neighbor beyond the hill, has, it seems, little time for such wonderings and simply says: ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’ The poem goes like this:

### **Mending Wall**

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.

The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.

I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.

To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"

We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is 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 neighbours."

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it  
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." I could say "Elves" to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. 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 neighbours."

This morning's scripture reading is also about walls. It pinpoints the issues around what walls people out from God and what walls we need to be wary of putting into place that may prevent people from experiencing God.

The woman who approaches Jesus breaks through every traditional wall that should prevent her from doing so. She is “a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin” (Mark 7:26). In other words, she is considered to be implicitly impure, one who lives outside of the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman, unaccompanied by a husband or male relative, who initiates a conversation with a strange man — another wall transgressed.

On top of all of this, her daughter is possessed by a demon. Although we are not told exactly how the demon affected her daughter, we can probably guess from other stories about demon-possessed people that it made her act in bizarre and anti-social ways. This woman and her daughter would have been the kind of family most people would want a tall fence between them.

Any way you look at it, this woman is an outsider. And what is more, Jesus actually is remembered as saying so as to her face. When the woman falls at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter, Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mark 7:27). The “children” in this statement are the children of Israel, the “little dogs” are understood to be all other peoples.

Jesus' response is harsh. How could he say such a thing? He appears to be quoting a bit of Jewish folk wisdom, but that does not lessen its sting. Some interpreters propose that Jesus is testing the woman to tease out her affirmation of faith. Others propose that here we see we see the very human side of Jesus, exhausted and needing a break, or perhaps not yet understanding the scope of his own mission.

While we cannot know exactly what Jesus was thinking, it is clear that when approached by the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus' immediate response is to appeal to the limits of his mission, his call to serve his own people. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus begins by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24).

When this tenacious mother comes back at him with her clever response, "Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Markn7:28), Jesus can only agree. "For saying that, you may go, Jesus says. The demon has left your daughter" (Mark 7:29). Jesus can only agree that God's love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. "So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone" (Mark 7:30).

From Tyre, Jesus heads off to the Decapolis – another Gentile territory with 10 Greek cities. Perhaps he is still seeking to escape notice and to rest a bit, or perhaps he has a new vision of his mission beyond the borders of his home territory. In any case, once again escaping notice proves impossible. "They brought to him a deaf man who also had an impediment in his speech, and they begged him to lay his hand on him" (Mark 7:32).

Like the Syrophoenician woman, this man too is an outsider. He is walled off from the world by his inability to hear and communicate with others. This time Jesus does not hesitate to respond to a desperate request, though he does take the man aside, away from the crowd. In a very earthy scene, Jesus puts his fingers in the man's ears, spits, and touches the man's tongue, and then says "Ephphatha!" which in Aramaic means, "Be opened!" Immediately, the narrator tells us, "the man's ears were opened and his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly" (Mark 7:35). Suddenly this man is able to hear and communicate with those around him. Not only is he physically healed, he is also restored to his community and the walls that limited his existence came tumbling down.

Now .... Remember Robert Frost's poem about walling things in and out?

In those early days after the resurrection of Christ, the disciples and followers had walled themselves up in Jerusalem. Gradually, those walls began to crumble as they began to trust that Christ was present in a whole new way and that they were to share that good news with others. At first, they understood that the others were people just like them.... Jews who had come to believe in the teachings of Jesus. However, they eventually realized that they had to let the walls down to people who came from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds who now wanted to follow their beloved Christ.

Robert Frost wrote:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,

I believe that continues to be the task of the church today. We need to be mindful of the walls that surround us. Some walls are essential. For example, we need walls that protect from abuse or violence. We are well aware of the need for walls called public health measures to protect ourselves and others from COVID.

And we need to continually be mindful of those walls that exclude people from experiencing the presence of God in their lives.

May God grant us the courage to follow the example of Christ in all that we say and do.

Amen.