

SERMON: A moment ago I read these opening words from Jacqueline Woodson's wonderful children's book, *The Other Side*: "That summer the fence that stretched through our town seemed bigger. We lived in a yellow house on one side of it. White people lived on the other. And Mama said, "Don't climb over that fence when you play." She said it wasn't safe."¹

My sermon today is about fences and walls, and is based upon the lesson from Ephesians, and the 14th verse which reads, "For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility." That distinctive phrase, *dividing wall of hostility*, undergirds my thoughts for you today.

When I was a much younger man, a very famous 'dividing wall of hostility' was built in Berlin, Germany. It was built out of grey concrete, topped by barbed wire, and it was a most unlovely wall. When we were in Grand Rapids, Michigan, some years ago, for the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, we found in one of their museums a remnant of that wall. Until I saw that wall in person, I had no idea just how ugly it was - both in appearance and purpose. It was built by the East German government, and its purpose was to separate one people into two. The German people were united by a common language, a common history and a common culture, not to mention the ties of family and friendship; but they were separated by two starkly different political philosophies, and a wall was built to keep the people apart - most especially, to keep East German citizens from crossing into the freedom and prosperity that had come to mark West German life. It was, in the language of the apostle, a *dividing wall of hostility* upon which many lost their lives. The world rejoiced when, in 1989, that wall was breached as a first step in the lengthy process of reunification, slowly bringing unity and peace to a people long separated by their dividing wall of hostility. We rejoiced in the courage of those who found a way to tear down that wall.

The *dividing wall of hostility* of which the apostle writes, concerns divisions that have long separated Jews and Gentiles. The divisions are represented by the words 'circumcision' and 'uncircumcision,' words that name the rite that has historically separated the holy from the unholy in Israel's religion. We hear this in the famous story of David and Goliath. As David approaches the army's camp, he can hear the humiliating taunts of Goliath, challenging Israel's army to send out a soldier brave enough to fight him. Young David asks, "Who is this *uncircumcised* Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (I Samuel 17:26) For David, and all of ancient Israel, the 'uncircumcised' were people whom God had rejected and so must be rejected by God's people. In fact, in later times, there was a physical wall built in the temple designed to keep the 'uncircumcised,' from entering the holy of holies at the heart of Israel's worship space.

Of course, Americans are not entirely unfamiliar with *dividing walls of hostility*. It was nearly 65 years ago that a Woolworth's store became famous in the city of Greensboro, N.C. There, in a city that separated people from one another on the basis of race, a group of black students choose to

¹ Jacqueline Woodson, *The Other Side* (G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York, NY , 2001). Illustrated by E. B. Lewis.

breach Greensboro's *dividing wall of hostility*, to sit at a lunch counter reserved for whites. The students were arrested and taken to prison, but their action was one of several significant actions that compelled that city to begin to deal with its racism. Later, after things had settled down a bit, and the movement toward racial equality had been significantly advanced, the lunch counter was donated to the Smithsonian, where it stands as a reminder of the many *dividing walls of hostility* that have separated Americans from one another.

These *walls of hostility*, Paul writes, have been and are being broken down in Christ. In Galatians Paul expresses this idea in the familiar, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) But, if we are one in Christ Jesus, why do we feel so comfortable with walls? Why is it that Patrick McCormick can write that "Christians tend to break bread within socio-economic monocultures, homogenized enclaves where nearly everyone is of the same color and tax bracket."² Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning." And while the United Church of Christ's Open and Affirming process has been useful in breaking down some of the dividing walls in our churches, it has also been the single largest source of disaffection among the churches, leading churches even now to leave the UCC rather than break down their own dividing walls.

In Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall," the phrase "Good fences make good neighbors" seems to represent good common sense. Frost's neighbor cites it as an accepted truth. And while Frost accepts that walls are necessary on some parts of the farm, he wonders why they need to be everywhere. He writes, "Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it / Where there are cows? / But here there are no cows." Earlier Frost has objected to his neighbor's wisdom, noting: "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'." Frost then declares, "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."

Kevin Baker writes, "The world is full of walls. Everywhere we go, there are fences, gates, partitions and other ingeniously constructed barriers -- all aimed at keeping something or someone in and keeping something or someone else out. We need walls: walls in our homes to protect us against wind and rain; walls to keep livestock safely in and predators out; walls to help us separate spaces and improve organization and efficiency. But one does not have to be a sage to comprehend how walls, both literal and spiritual, can lead to grief, division and even violence. All walls serve a purpose, but not all walls serve the purposes of God."³

Walls, visible or invisible, can be a challenging part of human living. We feel offended by another's words or actions, and we separate ourselves from them with walls of indifference and unforgiveness. We see homeless people and their possessions on the sidewalks of the main street in Concord, and find

² Patrick T. McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 51.

³ Kevin Baker, "Wrecking Crew" *Christian Century* 7/11/2006, p. 21

ourselves wishing that there was somewhere else for them to go - somewhere behind walls that would keep them and their shopping carts of possessions from spoiling our hopes for a more pristine city. Walls are an important part of the story of war in Gaza, where for decades walls have been built - sometimes between a farmer and the farmers olive groves, ostensibly to keep Israel safe, but also to circumscribe the lives of Palestinians going to work, visiting family, and tending to their crops. Walls are also an important part of the story of immigration, and the legacy of governing bodies that refuse to provide a fair and equitable process that prospective immigrants might safely utilize in order to provide a better future for their families. Their walls of hostility make a political statement, but don't provide a solution to the complex problems of immigration.

The walls that separated Jews from Gentiles in the time of Paul, were not easily broken down either. Their foundations were laid in the sacred writings of Israel, and reinforced by a history of holy wars. The young Christian community addressed by Paul's epistle would recall how they had been blamed for the disasters that had befallen Jerusalem, and how they had been driven from the city. In response, they separated themselves from their Jewish roots, and built theological walls that placed their former fellow religionists outside the realm of God. Thus the Apostle's declaration that 'Christ is our peace, that Christ has made both Jew and Gentile one, that Christ had broken down the dividing wall of hostility' was not easily digested. The resistance they felt to Paul's word may feel like the resistance some feel today to the inclusion of gay and lesbians within the leadership of the church, or to the welcoming of low-income housing into the heart of one's community. 'There's a reason we have fences,' you may say, echoing the common sense of Robert Frost's neighbor.

Yet the 'wall-destroying Christ' of Ephesians confronts us with one of the Christian life's fundamental questions - to whom do we belong? To which of the many voices vying for our attention in this world do we listen? These are questions, some suggest, that we must ask ourselves each day. Are we with those who build walls or with those who tear them down?

Returning now to Jacqueline Woodson's wonderful book, *The Other Side*, we find two young girls determined to subvert good common sense and the established order. After befriending one another, and finding ways of subtle communication, they discover a weakness in the rules and exploit that weakness to begin a process that will one day result in the tearing down of their fence.

It's an amazing book which unconsciously echoes the second century writing of an ancient apostle who believed in a Christ who was determined to break down walls. May we have the courage they demonstrate to subvert an order that holds people apart; in society, and in the church. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

"The Dividing Wall of Hostility"
Ephesians 2:11-14 and Mark 10:46-52

May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace.

Let us go forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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