

Sermon – “Good Neighbors, Good Fences”

Sunday, May 17, 2015

Scripture Readings – Psalm 1, Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13

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On May 3rd, 1908, in this newly completed sanctuary designed by nationally renowned architect Ralph Adams Cram, members gathered for worship and the dedication of the Albert Hale plaque in the East Narthex, a plaque which honors the pastor whom they believed laid the foundation for this spirited abolitionist congregation. On that day, they read Psalm 1 together. Today, we gather to dedicate the gifts and pledges that have been given in this anniversary endowment campaign to build on that legacy of faith and to introduce the Albert Hale Circle, which includes all who have invested in our future through the Westminster Endowment. Today, poignantly we read Psalm 1 once again, as a reminder to all generations who enter the gates of the psalter and who seek to live in relationship with Yahweh. It is a word to be wise in action, in choices and in character. It is a warning not to step outside the appropriate boundaries of the Creator. Hear now the word of God.

1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; 2 but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; 6 for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Amen.

Our second scripture reading, Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13, has been the text for this anniversary endowment campaign. We build a legacy of faith by building up the body of Christ. The church is called to be a new community based not on divisions in the existing social order but on the new humanity in Christ. The social hierarchy has been replaced by the body of Christ. In this new order, all members are essential and connected. Love knits the body of Christ together. Hear now God's holy word.

1 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. 7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. 11 The gifts God gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

The title of the meditation: “Good Neighbors, Good Fences”

The text: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” Ephesians 4:12

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, as we celebrate the 180th anniversary of our founding and dedicate the Building a Legacy of Faith gifts and pledges, we thank you for our rich history, our bright future and the call to be good neighbors. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

On this milestone Sunday let us reflect together on fences: white picket fences, stone wall fences, fences that are necessary and helpful because they provide boundaries which define and protect individuals within the community, and fences that unnecessarily drive a wedge between people because tradition or ignorance prevent them from coming down when they no longer serve a purpose.

The fence concept gained new meaning for Peter and me raising a child on a very busy Hanley Road in Clayton, Missouri. When Paul was two years old, our free spirited little boy wondered out the backdoor to the end of our front yard. We were both home at the time, we both thought the other knew where he was and we were both terrified when we discovered we did not. We found him standing on our retaining wall perched above Hanley Road, smiling and pointing at the cars (which he adored) as they drove swiftly past our house. Needless to say that spring, Peter and his father, Will Kieffer, built and installed a gate that fully enclosed the white picket fence next to our home. It was a happy day at the Kieffers' and one of the many lovely memories we have of Will. A necessary and helpful boundary was established, which provided newfound freedom for a little boy and his parents.

Over the years, as I looked out the kitchen window and watched Paul play safely and creatively in the backyard, our fence took on new meaning for me. It became a metaphor for the limits we are called to set for our children because children cannot always set limits for themselves and because children's creativity does not grow and thrive in chaos but in order, in the safety of a structured environment. That white picket fence reminded me that setting limits paradoxically offers freedom. And so in this day and age of limitless opportunities for our children, let us not forget the importance of setting limits.

Not all fences are this easy to define and as Paul grew up, in many ways, this one became obsolete, but the premise, the foundation that *boundaries are healthy and necessary* is as solid and firm as any I know. Today, when decisions about boundaries are complicated and difficult, I think back to that simple white picket fence in our yard; and pray for God's wisdom and grace to know when to build a fence and when to take a fence down.

The complexity of setting limits, of building fences is explored by Robert Frost in his poem "Mending Wall" in which he describes two neighbors in the annual springtime ritual of repairing the stone wall that divides their properties. He wrote the poem in 1914 as heightening nationalism created fences among European countries on the brink of World War I. Forty-eight years later in 1962 in the time of the Cold War Frost was invited to read his poem at the world's great dividing wall: the Iron Curtain. Frost died the next year. In 1991, the year the Cold War ended, Peter and I were driving through the hills of New Hampshire, which was Robert Frost's home for many years and the home of Peter's father. Listen to a few lines of Frost's thoughtful poem.

*And on that day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again...
Oh, just another kind of outdoor 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 neighbors."*

According to Philip Gerber, in his book Robert Frost, *The wall of field-stone is a relatively insubstantial symbol of the real barriers dividing humanity. Between these two neighbors is another wall, impervious, built slowly of set ways and habits, mortared firmly of tradition, upbringing and environment. One neighbor recites over and over again his creed: 'Good fences make good neighbors.'* The other counters: *'Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.'*

Frost has articulated a struggle which continues to be at the heart of the choices we make each day as persons of faith seeking to be worthy of the life we have been called to live... in the building up of the body of Christ. The challenge is to see parallels between the fences in our lives and the laws and traditions of our faith. These boundaries are to be respected. They remind us we are not autonomous... They remind us that we belong to the God in whom we live and move and have our being and to one another in the body of Christ.

When we honor and respect the boundaries of others, *we are like trees planted along the stream.* On the other hand, when we cling to the walls in our lives as absolute and unchanging, long after they have lost their purpose, we turn a blind eye to the One who asks us to be good neighbors.

To delight in the law is not to cling to rules, but to meditate, interpret and make courageous decisions about what God's commandments mean in new circumstances. For instance, as we honor the spirit and commitment of Reverend Albert Hale and our abolitionist founders to end slavery, we need to understand and confront the racism and other forms of discrimination that continue today in ways that are insidious, complicated and etched into the very foundation of our society. We need to know when to build a fence and when to take a fence down.

On our 180th Founder's Day, as we dedicate and build on the legacy of faith in this anniversary campaign, our goal to increase the corpus of the endowment is two-fold. First, it is for the purpose of mending the walls of this historic, noble building; and foremost, it is for the purpose of reaching beyond these walls with greater acts of kindness and generosity in our neighborhood, to the Springfield community and throughout the world.

May the God, in whom we live and move and have our being, give us the strength to create and to respect boundaries among us; the courage to tear down walls that unnecessarily divide us; and the wisdom to know the difference. May we never forget this church is in the world for ministry. Amen.