

Dissolving Walls With Compassion

Human beings are great at building walls.

Whether it's the great wall of China or the Berlin Wall or President Trump's often promised but not yet erected wall between the United States and Mexico, we love walls!

"Here at home, that border wall reminds us that there have always been two Americas: one of inclusion and one of exclusion.

"In one is the ideal of 'liberty and justice for all,' which is realized whenever Indian treaties are honored, civil rights embraced, and 'huddled masses yearning to be free' welcomed.

The other is found in a Constitution that originally allowed only white, land owning men to vote, and is noteworthy for its segregation, a growing gap [between the wealthy and everyone else, and million dollar condos going up in Kaka`ako while so many call home a cold slab of concrete sidewalk.]

These two visions of America continually compete for our hearts and minds, even in our churches." Myers and Enns, Ambassadors of Reconciliation I, ch. 4, (paraphrased).

Yes, humanity has a long love affair with walls.

But our love affair with walls goes beyond bricks and cement.

Paul's letter is all about the walls we erect between people of different faiths, colors, genders and nations, and how God's primary task is tearing down those walls.

On Wednesday during our super cool healing service, we had Paul's letter to the Romans which made this point once again, followed by Matthew's vision of the final judgment.

And the point of those two readings is that while we love to put up walls between all kinds of folks, while we love to categorize and stigmatize and isolate, the only distinction Jesus draws at the last judgment is whether we took care of each other, particularly, whether we cared for the least, the lost and the last.

“I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked....”

Walls built of race, creed, sexual orientation, class, and nation apparently mean nothing in God’s eyes – the only question is, did we care for one another, no matter the race, creed, sexual orientation, class, or nation of the one in need?

We also build walls in our most intimate relationships, even within our very selves.

We build them between each other because of hurt feelings or prejudice or fear.

We build them within ourselves when childhood traumas are too great to bear, so we build walls around painful memories.

But as we age, unless we find the courage to peer behind these walls, unless we find the courage to tear down those walls, we will find that the pain we thought we sealed away demands to be heard, leaking out in hurtful ways, harming those closest to us, harming our very own selves too.

Because in the end, we’re not made to live with walls, so in the end, the walls fail us.

Even the apostles have to learn this lesson the hard way.

In today’s gospel, they return completely elated at the power and healing that comes with being emissaries of Jesus, and yet in the midst

of their joy, they too build walls between themselves and Jesus: because they don't recognize that Jesus is the source of all that happened.

It's in the first line of the reading today!

"The apostles gather around Jesus, and tell him all that they have done and taught."

But it's not them, it's the power of God!

So Jesus takes them away to help them to learn yet again how to tear down walls.

He shows them that the way to remove walls is with compassion.

"Compassion" – meaning literally "to suffer with", meaning that compassion comes from a place not of helper/helped, not from a place of pity, not from a place of "pitying", but from a place that recognizes my pain in your pain, my anger in yours, your distress in mine.

It's the point of what the theologians call the Incarnation, God becoming a human being, Emmanuel, God with us.

God herself becomes our equal: to walk, sweat, thirst, to perhaps even suffer hemorrhoids, with us, to show us that if the greatest wall of all, that between the divine and the human, can be dissolved, then surely the walls we put up between one another can also be dissolved.

Compassion is the solvent.

And compassion comes from suffering.

No, not intentional suffering, not self-imposed suffering for the sake of suffering, but the suffering that is inevitable in just about every human life.

It's the story of the woodsman who took his young son hunting only to have the boy grabbed and killed by a wild animal.

Wrapping the boy's body in a blanket, he goes home but can't bear to tell his wife that their only child is gone.

Instead, he sends her out with a large pot, with instructions to call on her neighbors, asking each one to fill the pot with food, but only if they have never suffered loss.

She comes home with the pot still empty.

Everyone has known pain, she reports.

And so have we, replies her husband, taking the body of their boy from the blanket.

We live in a time when many pretend they can live without loss, with billionaires who scoff at death, freezing their heads in cryogenics or manipulating genes to put off death forever.

There is a small but growing political philosophy that says that only the rich matter, everyone else is to serve them.

This thinking underlies the attacks on our social safety net, on food stamps and social security and medical care.

Bede Griffiths, who lived among the poor in India for decades, has a remedy for this kind of thinking, praying always, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

He does this not to be morbid nor from a sense of guilt, but rather to "unite myself with all human beings from the beginning of the world who have experienced separation from God, or from the eternal truth.

I realize that, as human beings, we are all separated from God, from the source of our being.

We are wandering in a world of shadows, mistaking the outward appearance of people and things for reality.

But at all times, something is pressing us to reach out beyond the shadows, to face the reality, the truth, the inner and true meaning of our lives, and so to find God, or whatever name we give to the mystery which enfolds us." Going Out of Oneself, Parabola, 24-25.

This is our common condition.

We see the truth on occasion, but only dimly, as Paul says, as if through a glass - we sense there is more to life than often appears - only for that sense to vanish.

Recognizing our sameness with one another, particularly with the poor and marginalized, is to me the great witness of our Catholic Worker house in the back.

It's our opportunity here at St E's, even if just on occasion, to experience life from the standpoint of those on the outside, which is the only place we can ever truly find Jesus.

As Dorothy herself observed:

"The greatest challenge of the day is how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us.

When we begin to take the lowest places, to wash the feet of others, to love our sisters and brothers with that burning love, that passion which led to the cross, then we can truly say, 'Now I have begun!'"

In Jesus, God becomes the great dissolver of walls.

And we who claim him as Lord and Master, we are not only invited, we are compelled, by his unimaginable kindness, by his boundless mercy, to join his grand adventure of suffering with one another, so that in this suffering, this compassion, all that divides us may be turned to rubble, leaving us one with each other, and one with God!

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