

Walls

Human beings are great at building walls.

Whether it's the great wall of China or the Berlin Wall or the Wall that is ever expanding between the United States and Mexico, we love walls!

In fact, the U.S.-Mexico border fence was erected the same year that the Berlin Wall came tumbling down.

I didn't know that — but it is ironic.

"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 Kakaako 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.

That's what King David is getting at this morning as he lounges on his massage chair in that new cedar house he just built, the one overlooking the lake.

Big screen TV on the wall, the wine rack stocked with the very best, and as he takes a drag on his Cuban cigar, out comes his daydream for a Temple — a great collection of walls — a place to keep God in God's place.

Just as we enjoy walling others out, so we love to wall God in — into our own boxes, our own small vision of who and what God is.

It's such a natural human idea that even the brave prophet, Nathan, agrees at first blush...until he sleeps that night only to have a visit from God....reminding Nathan to remind David that God won't be confined within anyone's walls, that God is free, and, one other thing: God hates walls!

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

We build walls in our most intimate relationships, even within our very selves: between each other as a result of hurt feelings or prejudices or fears; within our very selves when childhood traumas are too great to bear, we build walls within to keep the pain confined.

But as we grow older, unless we find the courage to first peer behind these walls, unless we find the courage to one day tear down those walls, we will find that the pain we thought we sealed away demands to be heard, leaking out in hurtful and strange ways, harming those we love, harming our very selves.

Because in the end, we are 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 are building walls between themselves and Jesus: because they don't recognize that Jesus is the source of all they said and did.

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

"The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught."

But it wasn't them, it was the power of God.

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

And he shows them that the way to dissolve walls is with compassion.

The Letter to the Ephesians understands this truth to the core.

Paul has participated in some of the most bitter divisions — against Gentiles, against the new followers of Jesus, until that day when he is knocked on his backside by the God who insists that we are all meant to be sisters and brothers to one another: all of us: commies and republicans; gay and straight, ISIS and US Marines; rich and poor; black, yellow, white and brown.

All of us.

How can this happen?

It happens at the cross.

My daughter found an article she liked and posted it on Facebook.

It's by a fellow who says that he used to be a pastor but now no longer believes; because of all the division and hate and separation that exists even between people who claim to be people of faith.

He says this:

"I've been a deep believer my whole life.

18 years as a Southern Baptist.

More than 40 as a mainline Protestant.

I'm an ordained pastor.

But it's just stopped making sense to me.

You see people doing terrible things in the name of religion, and you think: 'Those people believe just as strongly as I do.

They're just as convinced as I am.'

And it just doesn't make sense anymore.

It doesn't make sense to believe in a God that dabbles in people's lives.

If a plane crashes, and one person survives, everyone thanks God.

They say: 'God had a purpose for that person.

God saved her for a reason!'

Do we not realize how cruel that is?

Do we not realize how cruel it is to say that if God had a purpose for that person, he also had a purpose in killing everyone else on that plane?

And a purpose in starving millions of children?

A purpose in slavery and genocide?

For every time you say that there's a purpose behind one person's success, you invalidate billions of people.

You say there is a purpose to their suffering.

And that's just cruel."

Many people find themselves agreeing with this man – but they have failed to understand the mystery of the cross, which reveals the nature of God.

That former believer sees a God who is far away from us, one who is frankly indifferent to human suffering.

While many people have that notion of God, this is not the God revealed to us in Jesus.

Perhaps so many embrace the notion of a far away, indifferent God, because it gives us leave to treat each other only at a distance, only with indifference.

Jesus reveals a God quite different from that.

Here is how one man, who himself suffered greatly from a lingering and painful cancer, and who came to understand the mystery of the cross, here's how he affirms his life as a Christian:

"I am a Christian not because of the resurrection (I wrestle with this), and not because I think Christianity contains more truth than other religions (I think God reveals himself or herself in many forms, some not religious), and not simply because it was the religion in which I was raised....

I am a Christian because of that very moment on the cross when Jesus, drinking the very dregs of human bitterness, cries out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In that moment, Jesus feels human destitution to its absolute degree: the truth is that God **is with us**, not beyond us, in suffering.

I am a Christian because I understand that moment of Christ's passion to have meaning in my own life, and what it means is that the claim that human beings suffer isolated and alone, is an illusion.

I'm not suggesting that ministering angels are going to come and comfort you as you die.

But I am suggesting that Christ's suffering shatters the iron walls around individual human suffering, that Christ's extreme compassion makes extreme human compassion – possible.

Human love can reach right into death, since, because of the cross, it is no longer merely human love." Wiman, My Bright Abyss, 155 (paraphrased).

In Jesus, God becomes the great dissolver of walls.

In Jesus, God is setting about to make us one, yes, with each other, yes, with ourselves, and this too: that we might all be one with God as well.

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