

The second reading today takes us to a place that's not often explored. Let's look at it together and see what's there. The author of the letter to the Ephesians speaks of those who were once far off and separated from one another who are now together. Since the reading doesn't explicitly say, it's reasonable to ask who those folks might have been. A bit of study reveals that the passage N. read to us was likely written by a Jewish-Christian author who was a member of one of the original churches founded by St. Paul.

His or her purpose was to explain that Jewish people and Gentile converts together now formed one unified body in Christ. Gentiles were now welcome in synagogues where they had not been before. That being said, the letter to the Ephesians was written in a period of time in which this acceptance of Gentiles was far from a settled matter.

The wall of hostility that had been broken down by Jesus was no mere poetic construct. Scholars tell us that in the Jerusalem temple area there had actually been a physical wall that separated the space where non-Jewish visitors could be and where only Jewish people could go. The inscription on that wall read "No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for the death that follows."<sup>1</sup> The distance between that heartwarming sentiment and the fellowship of Christianity that Jesus inaugurated was apparently too much for some Jewish people of the time to traverse. These were the folks the author of Ephesians wished to persuade.

It's not too different from the way it has been for all people in every age, when major social changes have occurred and walls built by law, force or social convention have been broken down. Full adjustment to new circumstances comes quickly for some, over time for most, and never for others. Consider the Berlin Wall, which came down in 1989 and how things have both changed and not changed since then.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonaldd, *Sacra Pagina: Colossians Ephesians*, ed. D. J. Harrington SJ, The Liturgical Press, Cleegeville, MN, p. 245

Walls to keep people in or keep them out needn't be physical. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the walls of legal racial segregation in the US were demolished. Demolition, however, was not followed by universal and instantaneous acceptance. I remember chatting with a black friend while in tracker school at Ft. Gordon, Georgia in 1969, five years after the Civil Rights Act became law. One Friday evening I suggested that we ask for passes and ride in to Macon together to grab something to eat and take in a movie. He looked at me with kind, sad eyes and refused. When I asked him what the problem was, he replied, "Thanks, Tim, but we can't. They'll kill me and beat you so badly your own mother wouldn't recognize you." I was shocked, but in that moment I realized that although the Civil Rights Act may have been signed into law the walls remained and were heavily defended. Few would argue that full adjustment has occurred even today. Walls like that one have a way of persisting even after having been legally demolished.

The central teaching of Jesus, the law of love of God and neighbor, stands in opposition to any wall that restricts the flow of love; any wall that impairs or even denies the unity among people of which our Scriptures speak today. If the Eucharist is a visible expression of unity with God, unity with God's people and unity with all of God's creation, then what might a person be saying who receives communion and has no issue with such walls? The Berlin Wall and the walls of racial segregation are one thing, but there are even subtler walls; those within you and me that separate us from God, from our neighbor, from creation and most alarmingly, from our own truest and deepest selves. No society can achieve unity while such fragmentation exists within its own people.

The roots of the motivation to build and defend walls within ourselves run deep, betraying their presence by an allegiance to fear, unhealthy self-interest and distorted notions of the world rather than faith in God, the habit of compassion and generous, self-forgetful service to others. Such walls create a toxic form of privacy that alienates us from our destiny.

When I told one a friend who's not very far along in his spiritual growth even after many years that I was going to speak about walls today he snorted and said "Good fences make good neighbors." I asked him if he knew where that quote came from, and he said he didn't. I told him it's actually found in civilizations around the world and its origins are lost in the mists of time. Robert Frost popularized the proverb in his 1914 poem *Mending Fences*, using it in a way that deeply resonates with our passage from Ephesians. Some of us might remember that it was widely quoted around the time the Berlin Wall was being demolished. I read just some of it to my friend, and I'd like to share those parts with you, too.

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...  
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....  
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."  
... I wonder if I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbours? ...  
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."...<sup>2</sup>

Today, as you receive the Eucharist, which I hope you'll agree is not at all like a wall, may I gently invite you to look within yourself together with Jesus and ask him to help you demolish any unloving walls of your own that the two of you agree need to come down.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall> , July 14, 2018