

## “Good Fences *Don't* Make Good Neighbors!”

I have a fence in my back yard that really should be replaced; it's original to the house, so it's probably 25 years old. But the cost to pay someone to do the work is nearly prohibitive. So, I try to imagine doing the work myself; I've built fences before, I know what to do, but that was a few years ago, and I'm not sure if I'm still physically up to the task. When I was a child and my family was on vacation, we would visit my aunt's in St. Louis; in her subdivision none of the houses had fences, and all of their back yards ran together forming a large green space. I remember it being quite lovely. I wish we didn't need fences.

All this reminded me of a poem by one of the great American writers, Robert Frost (1874-1963) entitled “Mending Wall.” In that poem, Frost is recalling the annual ritual that New England land-owning-neighbors performed each spring: that of walking along the stone walls that separated their properties, and replacing the stones that have come off. It was fairly arduous work, and when the narrator (who I assume is Frost) begins to question whether they actually need the walls, his neighbor insists on holding firm to the old adage that “[g]ood fences make good neighbors.”

But in that process of repairing the stone walls, Frost notices that nature seems to be campaigning against the existence of such walls. Between the ground swelling and contracting, causing some of the stones to fall off; and freezing water that breaks up the stones; it seems to Frost that the very elements themselves are conspiring to bring down the walls and fences that conventional wisdom insists “make good neighbors.”

And then, taking that observation to the next level, Frost supposes that it was God himself who has built into the very processes of nature a force that continually works to uproot, and overturn, and tear down those walls and fences we erect— and perhaps also the boundaries and divisions we create. And he articulates that notion with these words:

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 abreast.

I mention all this, because this would seem to be one of the points being made in our reading from *The Revelation to John*. In the description of that “great multitude that no one could count ... standing before the throne and before the Lamb,” all boundaries and lines of distinction that typically separate people are non-existent; for those worshiping are “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”

It’s a vision of the kingdom of God, and it’s a beautiful vision.

It’s a vision that reminds us of the words of God at the call of Abraham in *The Book of Genesis*, when God says “in you *all* the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

It’s a vision that St. Paul articulates in his letter to the Galatians, when he writes: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male [or] female; for all of you are one in Christ” (Gal 3:28).

It’s a lovely vision, isn’t it?

But it’s a vision that goes against how our world operates. Because quite often, the loudest voices we hear in this world say things like: “Members Only” and “No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service” and other things of that sort. In fact, some days so many of those voices that we hear seem hell-bent on reinforcing the notion that differences in color or culture, that differences in ethnicity or sexual orientation, that differences in political affiliation or religious preference, actually constitute legitimate boundaries that *should* be upheld at all costs, and against all threats.

This world— and in contrast to the forces of nature observed by the poet Frost— this world seems to want clear boundaries and fences, and even the laws to reinforce them.

But, against this backdrop, we need to be reminded that in our vision of the Kingdom of God, there is no black or white or brown or red; there is no rich or poor; there is no native born citizen or illegal alien; and there is no gay or straight. Rather, all people are included in God’s vision for humankind.

And just like Frost's notion that *nature* conspires to bring down all the walls and fences we build in our world, so too is God's kingdom working to ensure that *nothing will be left that can possibly divide us!* This is what St. Paul was talking about in his letter to the Ephesians, when he wrote:

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph 2:13-14).

This is the biblical vision of the kingdom of God. It's a vision of universal salvation; and it's a vision whose implications are clear: that is, from start to finish, God's purpose is *to restore all people*— and not only to him, but also to each other.

And all this leads me to the inescapable conclusion that “mending fences” is something we who would follow the Lamb have no business doing! (Which, I guess, means I shouldn't worry about my back yard fence.) In fact, God calls us to exactly the opposite work; that we should be the very people who in this generation share by word and deed this vision of the kingdom of God, that exists both in heaven *and* on earth.

And though we may face opposition in these endeavors, we can take some comfort in the assurance that, one day, the Way of the Lamb will be vindicated; that, one day, all the walls and fences— and *especially* all boundaries and divisions— will be eliminated.

Because, after all, this *is* the vision of the kingdom of God; and, as the poet Frost suggested, we can see it at work *even now*, in the very processes of nature.

Amen.