

January 29, 2017

*"Un-Mending Walls"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 16:19-31

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

I'd like to begin today by reading you some additional verses from the Bible:

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens; and his sovereignty rules over all. Psalm 103:19

God brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Isaiah 40:23

God changes the times and seasons; He removes kings and establishes kings. Daniel 2:21

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. Joshua 1:9

Those who know your name trust in you, for you Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you. Ps9:10

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. Psalm20:7

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. Psalm 56:3

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:3

Okay, so the elephant in the room these days is the political mood permeating the country. In fact, an NBC's News headline this past week read, "Trump's First Weekend Highlights America's Great Political Divide." Indeed, under the last three presidents political rifts have deepened, and this year there was truly an election day revolt, and today, the United States of America feels more like the Divided States of America.

Just consider all the things that have happened during President Trump's first week in office. We had millions of women marching in cities all over the land, we've got black people and white people seemingly more polarized than ever, we've got the Affordable Care Act being dismantled, we've got immigration halted from certain countries, we've got voter fraud questions, we've got the Mexico issue, a Supreme Court justice about to be named, and a whole lot more. And I know that many of you are frightened and concerned as to the direction the country is going. But, I also know that many of you feel that things are finally being set straight. That's why I read those verses. In order to give us all comfort and to remind us all that Almighty God is sovereign and ultimately in control of all things. If you struggle with that, then you have to ask yourself where is your trust. Where is your faith that as one nation under God we can come together as a people if we only live lives guided by those virtues and tenets that come from the Lord. Granted, right now, our political differences seem so impenetrable, that we've put up walls between us as a people. And that's not right. That's contrary to the way God wants us to live together.

Speaking of walls between people, Robert Frost addresses this subject in his famous poem entitled *Mending Wall*. The poem is about two land owners that have a wall separating their two properties. But one of the landowners makes the observation that there appears to be "something there is", "something there is", that doesn't want the wall. At first, he thinks maybe it's the unseen forces of nature like the winter ground swelling, that knock the stones of the wall down. Or, maybe it's animals or hunters passing by and brushing up against the wall, causing the stones to fall away. After a period of time, some gaps might even occur in the wall, perhaps even big enough for two people to walk through and come together. But when spring rolls around, the two landowners start to rebuild the wall that separates them. Yet the one landowner is still troubled and questions why? As the poem goes...

*He is all pine (trees), and I am an 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'.*

*Before I (re)built (the) wall I'd ask to know,*

*What I was walling in, or walling out,*

*And to whom I was like to give offense.*

*(You see, the truth is), something there is... that doesn't love a wall. That wants it down."*

But the other neighbor keeps on building. And says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Obviously Frost is making a statement about our human nature. That some of us seem to work so hard to keep building those walls and fences of separation. But there's something bigger, something greater, that begs us to tear down those walls. So let's look at today's scripture and see what we can learn from it.

We hear Jesus tell us a parable about a rich man and a poor beggar. Now there's an obvious wall that's easy for everyone to understand. And three things immediately strike me about this parable. The first thing that strikes me is the tremendous number of contrasts in the parable. Let's look at some of them. The rich man was dressed in fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. The beggar, obviously clothed in rags, hoped to satisfy his hunger with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. The rich man had the resources to employ a physician to care for him, but the poor man had no health care, only the dogs that licked the wounds and sores on his body. Jesus tells us the poor man just died, but the rich man died and was buried. As was the custom at that time, street cleaners would have taken the dead bodies of the unknown, the unclean, the beggars, and tossed them unceremoniously into the town rubbish heap where they were burned with the rest of the garbage. Whereas the rich man probably had a stately burial in an ornate tomb. And interestingly, the rich man is nameless. The poor man has a name! In fact,

and I think this is very significant, he is the only person in any of Jesus' parables to have a name; Lazarus, which means ironically, "God helps." And at the end of the parable, there is the contrast comparing the places where each man spends eternity. For the rich man, eternity was a place and condition of torment, remorse, and suffering. For Lazarus, eternity is a place where he is "comforted" and finds the highest joy and heavenly communion. And what Jesus appears to be telling us in this parable is that the notion of heaven and hell are realities. Oh, we don't want to hear about that in our churches today. It offends the sensibilities of many. And, no amount of persuading will change those people's minds, even, as the parable foretells, if someone, yes, some "One", should rise from the dead and try to convince them. But, I'll tell you this, because I believe it to be true. That our eternal destiny will depend on just how many walls we put up, and how many we tear down, in this life. The prophet Micah tells us to love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly before God. Pretty simple and straight forward. Jesus Christ tells us to love others, as we love ourselves. And to treat others the way we want to be treated. I wonder how many social, economic and political issues that divide us might disappear if we lived these commands. Love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly before God. Love others, as we love ourselves. And treat others the way we want to be treated. These are the principles that should guide us as we go through this life, not our political affiliations.

The second thing that strikes me in this parable is the indifference the rich man showed toward Lazarus. He never offered a word of acknowledgment or empathy, even though the two men actually lived in the shadow of each other. They probably even saw one another every day. For Lazarus spent most of his time, oh, so close to the rich man, just outside his gate. Yet, that gate never opened to Lazarus because a "wall" of indifference separated him from the rich man's home. A wall that added to the poor man's poverty. Mother Teresa once said, "Sometimes we think that poverty is only about being hungry, naked or homeless. But the poverty of being unwanted or unloved is the greatest poverty." Could it be, the root cause of all the societal problems we see in the world, comes from our indifference to the plight of others?

Let me give you a modern day illustration. This coming week I'll be attending a three day meeting at Rolling Ridge, the United Methodist conference center in North Andover, Massachusetts. And the hotel where I stay is just on the outskirts of Lawrence, the next town over. Now you can travel between the hotel and Rolling Ridge two different ways. One, on Interstate 495, which serves as an unofficial divider separating Lawrence and Andover, and you can go this way completely indifferent, and even oblivious to what is on one side or the other. Or, you could take a more interesting ride, traveling the back roads from the hotel, through Lawrence proper, and then into Andover proper. And if you did this, you would be

shocked at the difference. Lawrence can only be described as a disaster. Dilapidated buildings, out of business storefronts, closed factories, lots of liquor stores, check cashing stores, fast food joints, drunks and junkies walking the streets, almost every one of color... you get the picture. In contrast, Andover can only be described as...idyllic. A beautiful little town, with a magnificent library, colleges, well kept schools and parks and lawns, fancy homes, Starbucks, and, of course, very, very white... you get the picture. Yes, you can travel between the hotel and conference center, and see firsthand the disparity that exists between God's children, and any thinking person would have to ask the question why, and how did things get this way? Or, you can take the Interstate, that unofficial "wall," and remain completely indifferent.

It's pretty clear to me that Lawrence, and towns like Lawrence, are not the fault of President Donald Trump... or Barack Obama, or even George W. Bush for that matter. It's the fault of all of us. And that's the main point of today's parable. As Christians, we are all called to action by loving our neighbor. We are all called to tear down walls and barriers of indifference that lead to prejudice, judgment, injustice, close-mindedness, and instead build relationships. Because we are all God's children. All made in God's image. All deserving of the abundant life that God wants for his children living on this earth. In this parable, the rich man's sin was not his wealth. Not at all! It was his indifference to the suffering of Lazarus. His sin was in doing nothing. And, I want to stress, you don't have to be rich or a Republican to be indifferent, uncaring, doing nothing. There are plenty of rich Democrats that fit that mold perfectly as well. Jesus said, "When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required." The rich man didn't understand this. And then, when the time of his death came, he found out too late that he had built a wall... this time, between himself and God.

Oh, and lest I forget, the final thing, the third thing, that strikes me about this parable is this. Let's not forget about the five brothers of the rich man who were still alive. The rich man wants to warn them about how they should live their lives before they die. But Jesus says it's too late. They know the commandments. They know they are to love their neighbors. Think about that. Because my message today is not meant to be a reflection on only the rich. The poor and downtrodden are perhaps even more notorious of taking advantage of each other and preying on one another. Just look at the over four thousand shooting victims in Chicago just last year alone. So could it be, that you and I, rich and poor, alike, are the brothers, and the sisters, that the parable tells us are still alive. You see, this is not just a parable about life after death. It's a parable about our lives here and now. Who are we "walling in and

walling out.” And whether you identify yourself as a Democrat or Republican or, first and foremost, a Christian.

“Something there is, that doesn’t love a wall.” Yes, "some One" there is, that doesn’t love a wall. Almighty God! So go, and "un-mend" some walls today. Amen.