

Something There Is That Doesn't Love A Wall

Luke 13:10-21

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

*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.*

Can you imagine what it would be like to celebrate Sabbath in the Galilee? It's Friday night in the middle of the Galilee. The family has eaten their simple meal. The women have lit Shabbat candles. The men have led the family in prayer. And then everyone walks out through the cool air of the hill country evening to the synagogue.

It was probably a simple building, most likely a basilica style, meaning you would enter into a long room with two columns of rough hewn pillars holding up the ceiling. And you would sit in rows facing an apse where the torah scrolls would be kept.

You would sing psalms. Maybe a cantor would lead and the people would respond, or maybe you'd just all sing together. And there would be prayers. And at the high point of the service the scriptures would be brought out and someone in a calm, clear voice would read the ancient words- and these words would just wash down all over you watering the roots that tie you to an ancient past still very much alive, roots that give you a sense of place that can't be shaken.

And then in response to these words was the moment everyone was waiting for- a teacher, a rabbi, would interpret these words, would speak about what they meant to him, what they meant for the people. And for just a few moments as you would sit at the rabbi's feet, you could simply rest there, knowing that at that moment you had nothing to do, nothing to plan, nowhere to be, nothing to do but be carried away by his voice.

Can you imagine it? Can you imagine what it would feel like to sit on the rows of benches? Can you see the quality of the light- the room lit with flickering lamps and candles. Can you smell the incense the synagogue leaders had burned offering up scents as sweet as heaven?

And then, sitting there, taking it all in, can you imagine looking up and seeing that the rabbi interpreting the scriptures that night is none other than Jesus, Yeshua? What would he look like? What would his voice sound like? And what would he say? How would he interpret scripture? Would he talk about the law and delve into matters of teaching? Would he exhort the people like the prophets did? Or would he just spin parable after parable, entrancing them with endless stories about wayward sheep, lost sons, and lucky laborers who got paid a day's wage when they only worked for the last hour.

Well don't know- and neither did they. See, right there in the middle of his sermon he just stops. Right in the middle of this great, masterful homiletical effort I'm sure, he just stops talking. And everybody is stunned into silence wondering what is going on. Now, I'd like to think that maybe it's because he lost his place- you know, you know maybe he had just forgotten where he was going for a moment or two. (You know, I've heard that can happen. ☺) But this isn't the reason. Jesus hasn't lost his place. He hasn't forgotten what he's talking about. What's happened is that something else has captured his attention.

Or rather someone. See, Jesus was just going along preaching his heart out, I'm sure everyone was just absolutely with him- and then he sees this woman sitting there, over on the side, over near the back. He sees this woman there and she's just hunched over, bent over like someone has taken a stick and broken it, snapped it over their leg and then walked away from it just leaving it there. She's all bent over, twisted over so far she can't even turn her face to look up at Jesus. But he was sure looking at her.

And so he stops. He just stops. He stops talking. He steps down onto the floor. And he calls her to rise and to come to him. And for a moment she doesn't move a muscle. And everyone is just staring, not even daring to breathe, wondering what, on earth, is going to happen. And then, she begins to move, and with great difficulty, obvious pain, she struggles to her feet and shuffles over to him. It only took about five minutes, but it felt like a lifetime.

And then when she came before him this unusual preacher told her that she had already been released, and then, he placed his hands upon her, touching her tortured body.

Preacher Jana Childers says, "Do you know what I think? I think he put his hands on her feet. Tenderly on those dirty, broken toe nails and scabs that were the only thing she had seen for

eighteen years. I think he put his hands on her feet. Now, if Luke hadn't said "he put his hands on her," I would have said he kissed her feet. I would have said he let his hair fall over them the way the Alabaster Jar Woman's hair had fallen over his. I would have said he wept on the woman's feet. But Luke says hands, so I'll just say maybe he wept on or kissed her feet. Maybe he just held them."¹

And do you know, right there in front of God and everybody, right then and there that woman stood up. For eighteen years she had been bent over like a question mark, but that day she stood straight and tall.

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*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 let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on the day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
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 each the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."*

¹ http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/childers_4816.htm

Something there is that doesn't love a wall, but good fences make good neighbors. Good fences make good neighbors. You know there's truth to this. Our society- we are fairly obsessed with the idea of boundaries. Have you noticed that? We're all supposed to have good boundaries these days. If you talk to someone and express even the remotest kind of family challenge or problem you have with someone else- at some point in the conversation you can almost be certain they will ask you about your boundaries. Yes, we're all supposed to have "healthy boundaries" these days.

Now, if I sound a little bitter about this, I suppose I am at the moment. See, living with small children effaces any sense of remotely appropriate boundaries. I will confess that I sometimes make literal what we euphemistically term our "restrooms". I admit I will sometimes spend a little longer than normal in the bathroom just taking a chance to escape if for only a moment. But of course with small children even the bathroom, this great holy of holies, even these lines, these walls aren't sacrosanct. The other day Ella was apparently looking for me and couldn't find me- she proceeded to burst into the bathroom laugh her head off and shout, "Daddy- why are you playing hide and seek on the potty!?"

So you don't have to convince ME that boundaries are pretty dang good thing right now. I hunger for boundaries. I long for them. Boundaries, walls- these help us respect one another. They help us get along. And this is why I sympathize with the leader of the synagogue this morning.

I learned this week that the leader of the synagogue was not a Pharisee- the Pharisees were not in charge of the synagogue.² The leader of the synagogue was more like a regular

² From Amy-Jill Levine's [Jesus: The Misunderstood Jew](#). I'm also grateful to Dr. Levine for her challenge to the church to stop portraying Jesus as being against Judaism when he criticizes practices like Sabbath keeping such as

person who was simply elected to keep the place running. The leader of the synagogue was more like an elder in the Presbyterian church- like a cross between a worship elder and a clerk of session.

He's got a gazillion things to do and to think about. He's in charge of making sure the place gets cleaned and the benches are organized properly. He's in charge of making sure the candles get lit and the lamps have enough oil. He has to make sure the liturgy is done and the preacher is coming and has everything he needs. He has to see that the bulletins are printed and folded and ready, that the greeters will be there, and most importantly that the birthday chicken is in the right place. He's in charge of a billion little things to make sure are right, and, oh yeah, he's supposed to worship on top of it.

And so no wonder that when Jesus has his little moment and he decides to go all performance theater on them, it is no wonder that the synagogue leader goes a little ape. Because the Sabbath is important. It's not an option- it's a commandment. Rabbi Heschel calls Sabbath a palace in time. It is a wall set up around time in the middle of the week- a wall set up so that people might worship, and might know a little bit of peace, a little bit of quiet, in what were chaotic and often frightening times.

And like we said earlier, everyone has a role on Sabbath. The women light the candles. The men lead the prayers. And the rabbis? The rabbis read and interpret the Torah. The preach sermons dog gone it- they do not just crash through the wall of Sabbath and interrupt the entire service by stopping the sermon and calling people up out of their seats. And they certainly do

in the passage under consideration. By entering into the vigorous debate about how best to keep Sabbath, Jesus wasn't undermining Judaism, but exemplifying it. I have endeavored not to portray Jesus as "breaking" Sabbath here, but as offering a variant expression that, while unusual was faithful.

not make a spectacle out of people in pain that that community had taken care of for years and embarrass them in front of everybody.

Good fences, good boundaries, they make good neighbors- they help us to care for one another. And honestly, the synagogue leader has a point. I mean Luke tells us the woman has been sick for 18 years. 18 years. One more Sabbath night- it just isn't going to make a difference. Come back tomorrow or the next day and do healings- but tonight? Well tonight the people expect a nice service, a good sermon, something meaningful- hopefully not too long.

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*He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
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 offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "elves" to him
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."*

The synagogue leader does have a point. Boundaries are important. Sometimes it is important to draw a circle around something, like Sabbath, and say, "No trespassing."

Thing is, the young rabbi he's arguing with, Jesus, he doesn't disagree with him, either. Jesus never says in this passage or any other that the Sabbath isn't important. He never says "Sabbath schmammoth." His disagreement with the synagogue leader is over how best to keep Sabbath- showing us that sometimes you have to blur or stretch the lines and do things that are out of the ordinary if they might bring about some healing- that this is really what the Sabbath is all about.

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I have been riveted by a story this week that many of you have heard about. The newspapers, the airwaves, the blogs- they've been filled with discussion about a proposed Islamic community center to be built in lower Manhattan about two or three blocks from Ground Zero. The people who want to build it are calling it Park51. The people who oppose it are branding it the Ground Zero Mosque.

I have been incredibly proud of some of the things that have been said this week. And I have been deeply saddened by others. It's an issue that is cutting across party lines. Republican Mayor Bloomberg defended the community center, delivering what I believe will one day be seen as one of the finest speeches ever on religious liberty. Senator Harry Reid, the majority leader and a Democrat, says the Imam Feisal should find another location. President Obama generously seems to agree with both sides, first defending the rights of any religious group to build a place of worship anywhere in this country, and then later saying he was merely referring to the rights of Imam Feisel and Park51 or Cordoba House, not necessarily supporting the wisdom of the location.

At the heart of the uproar- and it is an uproar that may be one of the most important decisions Americans make about religious freedom in our lifetime. At the heart of the uproar is a concern about boundaries. The honorable men and women who oppose the plan for the community center- they all agree that Imam Feisel has the RIGHT to build in lower Manhattan. But because Ground Zero is hallowed ground, and it surely is, they argue he should have the wisdom to build elsewhere and respect the fact that we need to draw the lines around this area very, very carefully.

The most eloquent argument comes from our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. Archbishop of New York, Timothy Dolan, said while he acknowledges the right of the Community Center to be built, he also questions the wisdom of the location, citing the action of Pope John Paul the II who removed a convent from the grounds of Auschwitz saying while the intentions of the church was good the presence of the convent was simply causing too much pain.

And this is surely a good point. For it is true that sometimes good fences make good neighbors- that sometimes you have to draw a line around something and hold it fast.

But as much as I agree with this point and see the wisdom in it- I can't get Jesus out of my head. I can't help but see Jesus blurring ordinary Sabbath lines to bend down and heal that woman who was in so much pain.

And I can't help but see the connection with Imam Feisel and that community and the bent over woman. See, Imam Feisel Abdul Rauf is no radical cleric. He's not a Shia, or Sunni- and certainly no Sunni Wahabbist, the strain of radical Islam embraced by the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Imam Feisel is sufi. Sufi Islam is the pluralistic, mystical expression of Islam. Sufi

Islam affirms that God can be at work in other faiths and what is important isn't so much the external form of a religion but what is inside the heart of the adherent. And they, even more than Americans or Europeans, are targeted for death by terrorists threatened by Sufi's true expression of the faith.

You will not have heard that in Pakistan on July 2nd a mosque was blown up in India. It was not destroyed by Christians, Jews, or Hindus, but by Islamic terrorists. The reason was it was a sufi mosque promoting peace and interreligious dialogue- there 42 killed; 175 injured. Three other sufi centers were destroyed in May- all by either al-Qaeda or the Taliban. And earlier in the Spring the most devastating attack- the holy center dedicated to Rahman Baba was destroyed by the Taliban. Baba was an Islamic poet famous for his songs about the love of God. "I am a lover, and I deal in love," he writes. "We are all one body. Whoever hurts another, wounds himself." Sufi Islam has been bent over double by extremists for more than 18 years.³

Now, I don't know what's going to happen in this case. I don't know whether the center will be built, or whether it will be moved, or whether they'll just put the plans on hold until things settle down. I have no idea. But I sure hope they build it. I do.

Because if they do we will show the terrorists of the world, and by terrorists I mean Islamic terrorists, Christian terrorists, terrorists of any kind- we will show the terrorists of the world that they may frighten us, they may anger us, they may make us grieve, but they cannot, they CANNOT make us become like them. They cannot take from us our fundamental

³ I am grateful to Timothy Dalrymple's simply fantastic editorial in the New York Times "Muslims in the Middle" for the information regarding Imam Feisel and the subjugation of Sufi Islam.
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/17/opinion/17dalrymple.html?_r=1&pagewanted=2&ref=opinion&src=me

commitment to be a nation not of fence builders, but a nation, a people committed to climbing over walls out of love for our neighbors.

For we follow a young man from the Galilee who know that while sometimes fences can make good neighbors, behind this, behind this is the truth that something there is that does not love a wall.

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Beloved every day this week we will be faced with a hundred decisions about boundaries. What walls to build up, and what gaps to walk through- two at a time. May God give us the wisdom to choose well, and may God grant us the integrity to beg for forgiveness when we fail.

In the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the name of the Holy One of Israel. And in the name of Allah As-Salaam, the God of Peace. **Amen.**