

MLK—SOMETHING THERE IS THAT DOESN'T LOVE A WALL

(01/19/2020)

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

“But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.” (Luke 10:33)

This weekend we celebrate the birthday of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This is a special holiday for me because, as you know, it was through my participation in the March from Selma to Montgomery in the spring of 1965 that I received a call to the Christian ministry. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of my religious and political mentors at that particular time in my life. Another was Mahatma Gandhi. I believe that we need the vision of these men today: their vision of community, their vision of world community, their vision of a time when we will tear down the walls that separates and divide us from our brothers and sisters.

Robert Frost, in his poem *Mending Walls* has stated, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” In the poem, as you heard this morning, Frost carries on an inner dialogue with his neighbor. Frost’s neighbor feels the need to keep the wall between their properties in good repair even when neither of them is able to clearly articulate why the wall is there, what purpose it serves, and who or what is being walled out or walled in. Frost believes that his neighbor “walks in darkness” in his obstinate clinging to one of his father’s favorite sayings: “Good fences make good neighbors.”

Frost, on the other hand, believes there is something deep within us and within life that not only doesn’t love a wall; it wants to take it down.

Certain walls, certain boundaries are healthy. Healthy boundaries are an essential part of identity formation. However, some walls separate us from our brothers and sisters in ways that God did not intend, indeed, in ways that make God weep. These walls either lead to tribalism or are erected as an expression of tribalism. Tribalism, the radical identification with a single group that defines one’s identity, gives rise to a splitting of the world into two groups--our group and the other group. When we split people into opposite groups, we invariably assign a positive value to one group and a negative value to the other. We define ourselves as “not-the-other” and “not-like-the-other.” The “other” then becomes a threat to our basic values, to our way of living or believing; thus, the “other” must be controlled, dominated, eliminated, or destroyed.

Sadly, we have to admit that this tribalistic way of viewing human beings is deeply imbedded in our Judeo-Christian tradition. The God of the ancient Israelites divided the people of the world into Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles being non-Jews. It followed, of course, that God loved the Jews and hated the Gentiles. This led to the self-righteous slaughter or enslavement of the Canaanites, the people whose territories the Israelites conquered. This dynamic remains a barrier to the realization of a just and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians, the people who were driven from their homeland once again in the late 1940s in order to reestablish a Jewish state.

We Christians carried on this shameful heritage. Our belief that God divided the world into Christians and non-Christians led to misguided missionary efforts to convert the heathen. Our division of the world into Christians and Jews contributed to the mentality that gave rise to the Holocaust. The division of the world into Christians and Islamic infidels led to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Muslims during the Crusades. Our division of the world into Christians and pagans set the stage for the torture and death of women who were branded as witches. When we divided Christianity into orthodox believers and heretics, we opened the door to the tortures of the Inquisition.

This week, as many denominations celebrate a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we recall how we Protestants divided Christianity into Protestants and Catholics, how we viewed Catholics as the enemy, and how Catholics did the same thing in their division of Christians into Catholic and non-Catholic, with the assumption that only Catholics went to heaven. I believe that tribalism, as a ubiquitous psychological and sociological phenomenon, has been the greatest impediment to the creation of peace and world community in the history of the human race. This, by the way, is one of the reasons that the next book we will be reading in our Tuesday afternoon study group is by the Jesuit spiritual guide Anthony de Mello.

Tribalism is not the exclusive possession of religious groups, though religious groups have championed it throughout history. When our western European ancestors divided the world into civilized and primitive, this division led to the justifiable genocide of the Native Americans and the domination of the colonized peoples in Africa, Asia, and South and Central America. Our division of the world into white people and black people led to the evil of slavery and deeply damaged the cultural dominant of African Americans in this country.

In this century, we Americans divided the world into capitalists, who are the good guys, and communists, who are the bad guys. This led us to view the Soviet Union as “the evil empire,” a judgment that was proposed as a justification for a preemptive nuclear strike that would blow the Soviet Union off the face of the earth. Concurrently, the communists projected their shadow onto us, much as several Islamic groups do today in their depiction of the United States as Satan. The capitalist-communist split, by the way, makes it difficult for us to even imagine how some degree of socialized medicine could be of tremendous value to our citizens, and the projection of the shadow by Muslims onto us makes it difficult for the young, educated professional people of Iran and other Muslim countries to convince their country to engage with and become part of the mainstream world community.

Whenever we split the world into two groups, we invariably assign a positive value to one group and a negative value to the other. This judgment on the native inferiority of the other then becomes a justification for abuse. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber says that when we engage in this kind of dichotomization, we view the other person not as a “Thou,” a person who is an end in his/her own right, but as an “It,” as a thing. It is well known that in order to kill an enemy, we must first dehumanize him/her; we must turn him/her into a thing.

In Jesus’ time the basic split was between Jews and Gentiles. Samaritans, the people of neighboring Samaria, were the most commonly mentioned Gentiles in the New Testament.

There is some evidence that, at least in the early stage of his ministry, even Jesus split the world into these two camps. In Matthew 10 we read:

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

This passage speaks to the theological issue of whether Jesus was the Messiah, the one from the line of King David who was sent by God to redeem Israel, or whether, as I believe, Jesus was the incarnation of the Christ, the Word of God, one whose identity and mission were much bigger. At times, Jesus seems to see himself and his disciples as ministering only to Israel. At other times his focus broadens to include all people, even people who were enemies of the Jews.

This morning we heard the story of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite, who are both Jews, pass by the man who has been beaten by robbers. By contrast, a Samaritan, a foreigner who would not be expected to show sympathy to Jews, is “moved with pity” and

ministers to the man. In this parable Jesus challenges the Jews to think of the Samaritans as their neighbors, to see them as in the context of an “I-Thou” relationship, to see them as human beings with feeling and compassion, not to see them through the lens of the kind of “I-It” relationship which Martin Buber tells us is so destructive to the creation of true community.

Further on in Luke’s gospel we find the account of the healing of the ten lepers. Nine of the lepers were Jews and one was a Samaritan.

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. (Luke 17:11-16)

Here Jesus dissolves the split, the categories of Jew and Gentile that we find in other passages. I think that by this time Jesus had probably evolved in his understanding of who he was and the message, the Gospel, that he had come to preach and to teach.

Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in that bigger vision of Jesus. He tried to dissolve the racism, with its accompanying judgments of superior and inferior, that plagues our society. Although he fought for equal rights for blacks, he did not split the world into black and white. He reminded us that we are all children of God. His vision and his tireless efforts to achieve equality among all people was apparently so threatening to some that it led to his assassination.

Mahatma Gandhi was a Hindu. In the late 1940’s as the Muslims were being driven out of mainland India in the greatest refugee resettlement in the history of the human race, Gandhi had the temerity to suggest that this did not need to happen, that Hindus and Muslims should be able to live together in peace and friendship and share governmental power. A right-wing nationalistic Hindu, who was threatened by Gandhi’s vision of world community, assassinated this visionary leader.

Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned a time when black people and white people could live together as brothers and sisters. He spoke to both whites and blacks from the steps of the Lincoln monument when he said:

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self evident: that all people are created equal.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and girls and walk together as brothers and sisters.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountains of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

*This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning,
My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the Pilgrim's pride,
From every mountain side,
Let freedom ring.*

My prayer for us as individuals, for our church, for our nation, and for the world is that, to use Robert Frost's metaphor, we will tear down the walls that divide us. My prayer is that we will be able to transcend the myopic psychology of tribalism, a mind-set that has shaped our perception and our response to those whom we perceived as members of the "other" group throughout history. My prayer for those of us who are white is that we will challenge and work to dissolve the evil delusion of white supremacy. When we dissolve this dualistic perspective, we will live the vision to which Jesus calls us: we will see all the peoples of the world as our neighbors, as children of God, and thus as our brothers and sisters.

When we do this, we carry forth the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who calls us, who challenges us to live together: black and white, straight and gay, Christian and

Muslim as brothers and sisters. When we do this, we help to make his dream, his vision of community a living reality for us and for our children.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
January 19, 2020*

Mending Wall

by Robert Frost

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.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor 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.
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 eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
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.'