

Ephesians 2:1-10

Psalm 34

John 6:35, 41-51

Tearing down the fences

There is a story that comes out of Poland around the time of the Second World War.

In a certain village there was a man who was not particularly wealthy, nor a native of the village, nor did he attend the village church. Yet, if a stranger came to the village and needed a place to stay, this man would offer a cot in his little home. If a village family ran out of food, he was among the first to offer a loaf of bread or some flour from his own meagre supplies. If someone was in trouble with the authorities, who by and large oppressed the citizens of that nation, or if the Germans or, later the Russians, were performing a sweep of the village to collect up the young men for either imprisonment, or conscription, or worse, he would help hide the would be victims in the woods outside town or in some other way. He was loved very much by the villagers on account of all these things and many more.

Finally the man died.

The villagers asked the priest to perform the burial service and to bury the man in the church cemetery. The priest, who knew and loved the man as much as did the rest of the villagers agreed to conduct the funeral. Yet he insisted that he could not bury the man inside the church cemetery because he was not baptised. ‘Our cemetery is hallowed ground’, the priest said, ‘He must go where those who are not baptised are buried. These are the rules of the church and I cannot change them.’

The villagers appealed even more earnestly to the priest, saying that this was a good man and surely loved by God as much as any of the baptised on account of all the good that he had done. The priest agreed about the virtues of the man but insisted that the protocols of the faith were clear and could not be broken. Yet he proposed a compromise. ‘In recognition of your love for him and his love for you and all of God’s people in this village’, the priest said, ‘I will bury him on church land, near to those who have gone before him – those whom he has loved – but it will have to be beyond the fence that surrounds the consecrated ground of our cemetery.’

And so it happened. A grave was prepared just outside the fence surrounding the cemetery, and the body of the man was processed by all the villagers to the site, where the priest conducted the ceremony. The grave was filled and a stone placed before the night fell.

During the night something beautiful happened – something that became apparent when the priest went to the church next morning to conduct morning mass. The fence that surrounded the cemetery had been moved by some of the villagers – so that it now took in the grave in which the man had been buried.¹

¹ Story from Richard Fairchild, <http://spirit-net.ca/sermons/b-or16su.php>

[1] That is, undeniably, a lovely story. We might even say that it's a very 'Uniting Church' kind of story. It tells us how a certain group of people overcame what was felt to be an unfair prejudice in their community and religion. And yet, as moving a story as it is, what do we think it teaches? Who is it who causes the problem in the story? Certainly most in the modern liberal West would consider the villagers to be on the right track. They recognised in someone different from them a humanity they wanted to embrace, and to identify with.

Our reading from Ephesians this morning spoke of a fence which divides people: listen again for the word of God in this section from what we've already heard:

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth..., being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, [were] strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

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.

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross... So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near...

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

This all sounds very similar to our story. And yet there is an important difference between what we heard in the story of the cemetery fence and what Paul says about what Christ has done in his crucifixion. In our story, the townsfolk want to say that they have seen in the man who died a goodness independent of his being baptised or a committed member of the congregation: 'So what if he wasn't baptised, or a Christian, he was still a good man.' This is the argument of no small number of funeral eulogies even today.

But in what Paul says, the dividing wall between us is not overcome by our deciding that others are like us, and so we'll treat them nice; it is overcome by Christ who brings together peoples who don't care for each other at all.

We know that the church could often benefit from being reminded that there are 'good people' outside the boundaries of the church, and this reminder is scarcely needed only in the churches

But the gospel would remind us that what the church calls good is not actually this or that moral act, but God's reconciling work in Christ. The first word Paul speaks here is not 'be reconciled to one another' or 'move the fences out' but 'you are reconciled to one another' or 'there are no fences'.

The importance of this becomes apparent when we test our fence-adjusting will. Suppose the fellow who had died in our story had not had so good a reputation in the town? Suppose he was not a bad person but also not notably good. Who would have pleaded for him then? How good is good enough to ‘deserve’ to be buried in heaven’s cemetery? Or suppose he was baptised but scarcely impressive as a Christian. What then is the case for burying him inside the fence if we wonder whether baptism might not be enough? Questions like this remind us that we who can move a fence out to include can also move it *in* to exclude. And, if we are honest, we would like to move a few fences in.

But when Paul says that *Christ* is our peace – that Christ will be the source of true peace among us – he is saying that true peace comes not from us trying to get over each other’s little foibles or working out who is good and who is not – who is inside the fence and who outside. Paul’s point, rather, is that *God* moves fences, whatever we think we are doing with them. No one comes to me, Jesus said in our gospel reading today, unless the Father draws him. The only question, then, is who is drawn in this way by God, or where God sets the fences.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the fence around the hallowed ground of that cemetery – or the sacrament of baptism – does not declare who is good and who is not. It indicates only who knows – or who *should* know – that there are no fences with God. To baptised is not yet to be good. It is, rather, to have given up all hope of goodness apart from what God bestows.

This is not to say that we leave it all to God, as if we have no part in the work of reconciliation! We must move (out!) all the cemetery fences we can, so to speak! But watch out when you find that there are people you’d be happy to leave outside the fence. There may be a sign here that there is something between you and another which is beyond your ability to overcome, and yet it must be overcome if there is to be true peace and right relationships between us – if, indeed, God has removed all the fences.

And watch out if there are some inside the fold you wish were buried a little closer to the fence so that you could move it in a bit, so now they are outside! Some Christians *are* the worst! An interesting thing about a line like that in a sermon is that preachers have to decide beforehand who they will be looking at when it is uttered. By a curious twist of fate, via this medium, I’m looking directly at all of you at once, and myself as well!

‘For *he* is our peace, in him the fence between the ‘ins’ and the ‘outs’ – the hostility between us – has been broken down.’

This is not a naïve or blasé dismissal of the problems which beset us. It simply indicates our investment in fences, our confidence that we know who is righteous and who is not.

To say that God has torn down all fences is to say that God loves with ‘undistinguishing regard’, as Charles Wesley put it – without even the distinction we draw between the good and the bad.

We desperately want to be good, and to discover an imperative to *doing* good in the gospel. This is, indeed, part of Christian discipleship. But we first *become* disciples of Jesus when we discover that, whatever we have been, we are now drawn by God to Jesus as his sisters and brothers. This is to say that we now share in Jesus’ own experience of the liberating love of God. And so, like him, everything we then do and say is to be said from that liberation.

Jesus is our peace. Jesus is our promise of God – the promise indeed of our very selves, restored not only to God but to each other.

We wait, of course, for the full realisation of that promise. But we do not wait passively. We wait in that active prayer which tears at the walls within us, that there might be no walls between us.

For what God has done and will do – that we might know him and be a part of each other, without distinction – all thanks and praise be given.
