

Your Love Has Broken Every Barrier Down
Ephesians 2:14-16, Galatians 3:28, “Mending Wall” (Frost)

Steve Hollaway
Harbor Church
February 12, 2012

[Note: I was asked after this sermon if I think Harbor Church needs this sermon. Do you think that walls keeping out women or gays are a problem for us? Probably not. Maybe I needed to articulate the ideas in this sermon for myself, against the backdrop of my life in the Southern Baptist Convention. But I also think that inclusive Christians need to explain why they believe what they do—not that they are tossing out the Bible, but that they are trying to read it and act it out as Jesus taught us to.]

I’ve always liked Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall,” but it means a lot more to me since we moved to Block Island. Now I live everyday with the kind of wall Frost talks about, stones piled on each other, some loaves and some balls. And I see, over time, that there is something that doesn’t love a wall. There is something that wants to take them down: you could say ice and wind, you could say elves, or you could say that there is an urge deep down in the nature of things to make a wall fall down.

I’m amazed by the places on the island where I find walls. Walking around the maze and the Clay Head Trail, for example, far from any sign of a farm or a farmhouse, on land completely overgrown with bayberry and not far from the cliff that drops off to the ocean, there I find an old stone wall. A few stones have fallen. Vines and branches have almost hidden it. And I always wonder, whom did this separate from whom? Generations ago there were farms here. There were animals and conflicts over who owned what. All of that is gone. The men who built and rebuilt the walls have long since passed from the scene. But the wall remains, even though it no longer has a purpose.

Robert Frost’s character asks as he and his neighbor mend their mutual wall: *Why* did we need walls? To keep out cows. But now there are no cows, and apple trees will not wander under his pines. The boundary has no function, and yet we maintain the walls carefully. The unthinking neighbor does it because he believes in the notion that keeping the neighbor *out* makes for a good relationship.

It is almost Valentine’s Day, and I want you to think about the destructive nature of love. What love destroys is the walls between us. The last stanza of the old hymn *Just As I Am*—always sung as the invitation song at Billy Graham missions—says it beautifully:

*Just as I am, Thy love unknown
Hath broken every barrier down.*

The passage we read from Ephesians 2 says that the great act of God’s love was to break down the wall of hostility that separated Jew from Gentile. Verse 14: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.” This was *always* God’s plan, Paul says. It was God’s secret plan from the beginning which has now been revealed with Paul as the announcer. God’s plan was never to send a Messiah for the Jews—even though Paul *was* a Jew, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee of the Pharisees. Paul has come to understand that God’s plan was always to create *one* people for himself made up of people from every nation. It was God’s plan to send Jesus to demonstrate God’s love and both to demonstrate and to *create* a new humanity, by his death and resurrection to restore God’s original plan for humanity. In order to do that, Jesus had to destroy the barrier separating Jew from non-Jew—and he has done it.

In the Temple in Jerusalem there were literal walls: a wall to keep out Gentiles, who were only allowed in the outer courtyard; then a wall to keep out women, so only the men could go to the inner section; then a wall to keep out laymen, so that only priests could enter the holy space. Archeologists have found an inscription that was once on the wall separating the Gentile area from the Jewish. It read “No one of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure round the temple. Whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for his ensuing death.” That was the wall that Jesus had destroyed, according to Paul.

You see, this is what love does. Love breaks down walls of hostility. Love knocks down the dividing wall and makes us one. In some ways, religion before Jesus was oriented toward separateness. Under the old law, Jesus reminded his hearers, the old way was to love your neighbors but hate your enemies. It is us vs. them. But I say to you, Jesus said, love your enemies. Break down the wall that separates you from your enemy—whether the reason is ethnicity or nationality or gender or class. In Christ, Paul says, meaning *in the church, the body of Christ*, there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for we are all one in Jesus. That is Galatians 3:28, where the amazing thing Jesus has created overwhelms Paul’s old ideas about different rules for different people. Sometimes he falls back on those rules, but in that verse he affirmed the revolutionary truth: the walls between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and masters, between men and women have all been knocked down by the cross of Jesus Christ.

But the tendency in religion is to *mend* the walls that are falling down. We walk along the wall putting back the stones that Jesus is knocking down. We tend to call things “moral values” that are basically *markers* of who is in our group and who is not. Thursday about 5:30 I was walking up Fifth Avenue in Manhattan and saw a big bus parked on my right, from Spring Valley, New York. It was filled with Lubavitchers, the strictly observant Hassidic men who work nearby in the Diamond District. They all had black clothes and black hats and beards and sidelocks. Is it really a *moral* principle to dress in the plain style of 18th century Eastern Europe? Is it a *moral* principle to allow your hair to grow on your sideburns but not in the back? Perhaps these men would say yes, but to us it is apparent that these are markers of their membership in a community.

You could say that the ritual of circumcision was intended that way—not for hygiene but to mark membership in Yahweh’s people. It became a huge moral issue for many people, with people upset if you ate a meal with an uncircumcised man. But Paul says flat out that circumcision and uncircumcision are now nothing (1 Corinthians 7:19).

But we have a problem. Didn’t *God* command circumcision? How can it now mean nothing? One possible answer is that it was a wall that had a purpose once, but now it does not serve that purpose. Once it was necessary to make a clear boundary—these are God’s people and these are not. But now—because of what Jesus showed us and what Jesus did on the cross—we know love is wider than that. Jesus is our peace. He has made peace between Jews and Gentile; he has destroyed the barrier. Jesus set aside the law, Paul says. Why did he do that? Because his purpose is to create *one new humanity* reconciled to God.

Sometimes, as on Block Island, we think we have to keep a wall just because it is old. Sometimes we think we have to keep a wall between people because *God* built the wall. But do we? Can God change the rules?

Take this wall between Jews and Gentiles. It’s still there in many ways. The Jews keep the wall mended every bit as much as the Christians. To the Jew it is God’s eternal purpose to separate out for himself a holy people. But Paul says—against a *lot* of evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures—No, God’s *real* purpose behind that was to have a holy people one day drawn from

all nations. Israel was to be a pilot program, to bless all nations, but now that wall between Jews and Gentiles is obsolete. Jesus has knocked it down by making peace with God and peace between Jews and Gentiles on the cross. The cross says you are all forgiven—you are right with God—not by following the rules (however useful they were once) but by God's *gift* of a love relationship.

I think that God's love is continually breaking barriers down. In spite of what Paul said in Galatians 3:28, it took 1800 years for slave and free to become one in the church. For centuries we could put slave and free in the same church building, but we kept them separate as if one were more equal than the other. In some ways, we are *still* knocking down that barrier in this country, because as Martin Luther King pointed out, Sunday morning is still the most segregated time in American life. We are still—on both sides—mending the walls between the descendents of slaves and the descendents of masters.

We still want to wall something *in* (our sense of self, of group identity) and we want to wall something *out* (the other, the difference). Sometimes in the name of diversity we accentuate our ethnic or class characteristics in a way that separates us even more, rather than acting in a way that accentuates our common humanity. Jesus is about knocking down the barriers to create one new humanity. Yes, when we get to heaven and worship at the throne of God and of the Lamb, there will be songs in many languages and identifiable worshipers from many ethnic groups, but all those differences will not be barriers any longer.

Can we extend this conversation—on the Sunday before Valentine's Day, when we think about romantic love—to the wall that we keep mending between men and women? For many Christians in America, the greatest threat to the church and the nation is the breakdown in gender roles. Women refuse to act like women, they say, meaning that they don't stay home and don't submit. And therefore men don't act like men—providing leadership and living by warrior virtues. There is a group called The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. One of their leaders, John Piper—whom I admire as an interpreter of Jonathan Edwards and for his idea of Christian hedonism—has recently gone beyond saying that we have to keep the wall between men and women because it is biblical law. He now says that there is something fundamentally masculine about Christianity, and something fundamentally masculine about God.

See, this is where it goes when you keep repairing the wall. You want to keep my kind in and their kind out, and you begin to believe that God is *one of us*. For Piper, that means that God is male.

Those who mend the wall between men and women say that *God* built that wall. That wall is in the Bible. And they have an argument there.

If the main issue in life is the authority of the Bible, then it makes sense to keep propping up the wall because to say that the laws about women as property were *wrong* is to say that God was wrong. BUT if the main issue in life is *the love of God*, it makes no sense to keep that wall up. If the main revelation we have of God's will is *not* the Law but *Jesus* himself, then we look at how Jesus knocked down the wall between men and women in his own life, and how—as Paul understands it—Jesus gave his life to create *one* new humanity beyond ethnicity and gender, then we see that in Christ there is neither male nor female.

As Robert Frost's character says it, if I'm going to build a wall, I'd like to know what I'm walling in or walling out. If we men wall women out, or if we wall femininity out of our conception of God, we are cutting ourselves off from a part of ourselves as well as depriving the church of its full humanity. I came across this quotation this week in the Princeton alumni magazine, from a book by a minister writing about selective social organizations on campus:

Walls that exclude are as high on the inside as they are from the outside, and the danger for the insiders is to become decreasingly aware of and ultimately uninterested in any way out, failing to grasp the extent to which social exclusivity arrests them emotionally and intellectually. —Rev. Frank Strasburger, *Growing Up: Limiting Adolescence in a World Desperate for Adults*

If it's true that traditional religion contains walls that have become obsolete, there are only a few ways to explain that. Either (1) the wall once had a useful purpose—like the wall to keep out cows—but it no longer has a purpose, or (2) when we built the wall we did not have a complete understanding of God's will. You can make the case, if you like, that there was a time when Jewish separation and patriarchy and slavery were *necessary*. I don't buy that, but even if I concede that point it's still true that the gospel of Jesus Christ knocks those barriers down.

But I want to go one step further and ask this question: Are there still walls that we are mending, trying to prop up, when the forces of history and justice seem to be knocking them down? The most obvious of these walls, I think, is the wall between heterosexuals and homosexuals. Did God build that wall? Well, did God build the wall between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female? You could say so. It's in the Bible. But did *Jesus* knock down those walls? The Bible itself says so.

There is always a chance that I am wrong to accept gays as equals, and that the people who think the survival of the church and the Bible depend on rejecting gays are right, but I think God's love has broken every barrier down. If find it hard to believe that this wall—between straight and gay—is so different from the other walls. Is this really a moral issue or a marker issue? Is it a wall we build in order to define ourselves by who we keep out? Yes, it's true that some of the church's rules are about behavior rather than orientation, because everyone has conceded that orientation is not a choice. But can we say—this close to Valentine's Day—that people on one side of the wall get to act out their love and people on the other side must deny it?

Obviously faithful Christians disagree about these matters, just as they still disagree about the ordination of women—or, this week, contraception. But the more I think about how Jesus destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, the more I conclude that he wants to create in himself, in his church, one new humanity, made of male and female, gay and straight.

Remember, it is Jesus who has knocked down the walls. We don't have to do it ourselves. Jesus has taken down the wall that kept us from God's presence as sinners and Gentiles. He has taken down the wall that separated us from people who were different from us and made us one. We do not create this new humanity. Jesus has done that. We just have to stop mending the wall.