

Luke 16:19-end, 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Amos 6.1a,4-7

Sermon: 25th September 2016 – Trinity 18
8 & 10 am @ St. Andrew's Totteridge.

*May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

One of my favourite poets is the American Robert Frost. He wrote a powerful poem called '*Mending Wall*' in which he describes the traditional annual spring exercise of mending the dry stone wall between his and his neighbour's property; they walk either side replacing the stones that have fallen. The poem's impact depends upon the observation in its first line:

*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.*

He goes on to describe the mysterious way in which the gaps arrive,
*No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.*

One year, out of mischief, Frost challenges the neighbour on the need for the wall at all, especially where there is no livestock, just pine and apple-orchard:

*"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know,
what I was walling in or walling out,
and to whom I was likely to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down."*

The neighbour, clutching a heavy boulder like an ancient stone-age warrior, or someone out of the Flintstones, retorts, '*Good fences make good neighbors.*' The poet's response is to imagine seeing the neighbour in his mind's eye, moving,

*'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"*

We human beings seem to have a love-hate relationship with walls, don't we. From the earliest of times, from the Great Wall of China, to Hadrian, to Offa, to the metaphorical Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall, most recently in Palestine, and with the distinct prospect of one separating the US and Mexico, we invest heavily in walls, and never seem to learn that one day, every wall comes tumbling down. Because, *Something there is that doesn't love a wall*, and I suspect that that something is God.

Humans love walls because they help us to feel safe and secure, even if this is only an illusion. They become psychological borders, demarcating territory we can call our own, but really, all they are, are lines in the sand. According to psychologists, we even have an invisible wall around us – we call it our 'personal space,' an area we resent having breached unless it's by someone we know very well.

While on one hand walls may help us feel secure, on the other they are usually an outward and highly visible sign of something dividing us; something we want to come between us. And that doesn't help us to feel good about ourselves; quite the contrary, deep down I suspect it makes us feel rather uncomfortable. Like we know this isn't really a good solution, it's just one that will have to do for now because we need to feel secure, especially if we're wealthy; boundaries need to be made clear, and if we make them clear then we won't argue, we'll avoid trouble.

The 1st Letter of Paul to Timothy warns of the problems wealth can bring, how this can lead us from faith, causing us to pierce ourselves

with many pains. In the parable of '*Lazarus and the Rich Man*' we hear much the same sort of story. Notice how one of the first details refers to the rich man's gate, beyond which Lazarus, in all his poverty and hunger, cannot pass. The physical barrier of the gate can be seen metaphorically as something far more profound that divides them, and I don't just mean the material wealth that one conspicuously holds and the other does not.

Notice also how the story focuses on the rich man even though he is not named. Lazarus is a passive participant in all that occurs because according to the rules of the kingdom of heaven, and although he suffers in his present condition, Luke has already told us in ch.6 that Lazarus is already blessed, along with all those who are poor, hungry, weeping, excluded, reviled, or defamed for Christ.

What we fail to realise about gates and walls is that they work both ways – they may keep undesirables out, but they also have the effect of shutting us off from each other. Luke has already told us in ch. 6 to love one another, to 'do to others as you would have them do to you', reminding us to be merciful in the way of the Most High, that '*he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.*' When we close people out, to all intents and purposes we also close out God, we '*pierce ourselves with many pains*', for we deny his presence in our hearts by denying his presence at the heart of everyone, whether this is realised or not.

A gate, or a gap in a wall, is not just a way out; it's also a way in, a way in to our own hearts. The rich man, and perhaps Robert Frost's neighbour, both fail by not allowing contact. Just as we are taught to lose our own lives in order to gain them, so we must love our neighbour as ourselves. The parable attacks the blindness that fails to see the purpose of the gate; that treats it as a point of exclusion rather than a place of access. At the heart of every relationship there is a gate that we can open or close, even in our relationship with God.

*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.*

This is the two-way traffic of which I speak. Those who miss the significance of that opening, that two-way gap ; who believe that '*good fences make good neighbours*', may overlook that in shutting people out, they make it very difficult for someone bearing a drop of cooling water to get in. But let's be grateful for our merciful God, who is kind to both the ungrateful and the wicked. We can trust him to bring down walls. Robert Frost described how the gaps arrive:

*No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there...
... Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.*

Spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Luke 16:19-end The Rich Man and Lazarus

19 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." ²⁵But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." ²⁷He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." ²⁹Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." ³⁰He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." ³¹He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." '

1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Amos 6.1a,4-7

Complacent Self-Indulgence Will Be Punished

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
the notables of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel resorts!
⁴ Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
⁵ who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
⁶ who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
⁷ Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

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