

FENCES WE BUILD AROUND OUR LOVE

Luke 10:25-37

July 14, 2019

You and I put fences around our love, don't we? We don't like to think of it that way. But we do. All the time. We like to think of ourselves and our congregation as sources of love for those around. But we put up fences.

Some of them are good fences. At least we think they are good fences. "Charity begins at home." We need to take care of our own, right? And translated, that means 'And we'll take care of the others if there's any left over that we want to spare.'

The Presbyterian Church has historically taken the stance that it will pay its very significant donation to the National Council of Churches before it pays any of its own bills, or mission activities, or theological seminaries, or anything else. Our Presbyterian Church is making a statement. It is that mission done in ecumenical partnership as one world-wide church, one Body of Jesus Christ in this world, is important to it . . . as important or more so than any of its own individual needs.

That's a lesson you and I might learn in our tithing to the church. The church's mission and ministries of Jesus Christ are more important than any individual use we could put our money to, so our tithe should come right off the top of our income check . . . without first counting what sort of bills or needs we might have for it. If you and I pay our tithe at the end of our income period, really what we're doing, whether we say it out loud or not, is , 'Charity begins at home, and we'll take care of the needs of Jesus if there's any left over to spare.'

Others, in their attempts at stewarding their resources of love, say, "Family first." That's a good way of saying, "I'll take care of the wants of me and mine, and then take care of any needs of others later, if I think about it." Good fences.

“I have other important things to do, things I am sure God wants me to do.” So we pass by the difficulty someone is having with their car, perhaps little, concrete, everyday needs. Somebody else can take care of that; I have this meeting about church I have to be at. I’ll bet that was the fence that went up in the mind of the priest. So he hurried on by. After all, the fellow on the road was on the other side of that fence.

Some of the fences we build around our love are specific fences. “It’s their own fault.” So of course I don’t have to show love to that person because they deserved what they got. Nazi Germany got very good at erecting specific fences. Jews, Gypsies, the deformed, the aged. All on the other side of the fence. “We don’t have to care about them. We’re over here and they’re over there – on the other side.

Americans got so good at fences that we put thousands of Japanese Americans behind them for the duration of WW II. Love them? No, fence them off.

And rationale for the current cage fencing seems to be that they’re trying to get through our fence illegally. Instead of being purposely cruel, how can we be loving?

The Good Samaritan. The basic meaning of the parable is not simply the Samaritan’s goodness. We stress the goodness, but Jesus was stressing his Samaritanness. It was not simply that he was good that was important, but that he was a Samaritan.

The real problem, the perpetual problem of the human race, is not how much we do to help our own, but what we do to help those who do not belong to our tribe, our clan, our nationality.

Sydney Harris has said, “Taking care of our own kind is, of course, better than being selfish, but not much better. It is a form of exclusiveness posing as

solidarity. For those who call themselves Christians, it is little more than pride in having been born who you are. The world will not be a better place until most of us become people who reach out toward the Other, not merely towards the Same. Exclusive loyalty to a group of any kind is a repudiation of a loving creator, no matter what your version of religion might be.”

Sometimes the fence is, “It’s their own fault, and to help them, you see, would lead to their becoming dependent on our hand-outs. So for their own good, we won’t help.” And that fence sounds like it was built on solid ground. Sometimes it IS exactly right, as every person who has attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting can attest.

Most times, however, “I shouldn’t help them; it’s their own fault, and my helping will lead to their becoming dependent” is a fence you and I build to keep from having to love someone. Think of the corollary to “It’s their own fault.” That corollary is, “We give to the deserving poor.” How nice, and how nice a way to wall off others we don’t have to give to, because they aren’t as deserving.

Jesus looks for His followers to break down this “deserving” fence and give the benefit of the doubt. The Samaritan did, and he found a person truly in need.

There are three kinds of people: those who beat people up, those who pass people up, and those who help people up. You and I in this sanctuary of God like to think of ourselves as one of that third group of folks, but it might be interesting to write down the names of those we have helped up in the last week or two. Writing things down saves us from being vague, and forces us to face facts, doesn’t it? God’s mercy extends to those who don’t deserve it – even you and me, huh? So ours should, too, right?

Jesus jumped a number of fences in our lesson, and the lesson calls you and me to jump them, too. First, he jumped the racial fence. Every Jew knew that Samaritans should not be heroes in stories. But Jesus jumped right over that one.

We help *our own kind*; we all know that. But the Samaritan helped someone whose kind we do not know. The kind is not what mattered, but the need.

Jesus jumped the fence of inaction. Who is my neighbor and how should I love that neighbor? Jesus jumped right past the inaction that comes from being near, living by, not noticing, or not having enough time. (Boy, that one gets close.) He jumped clear into action. To LOVE is to do something for. *To be neighbor* is to respond to the need of. Did the Priest and the Levite shake their heads and say “poor fellow” in passing? They would have had to be pretty hard-hearted not to, but true compassion expresses itself in active help.

A woman was selling tickets for a concert to raise money for shelters for the homeless. It was a community effort, and the musicians were donating their time and talent. One man, trying to get out of helping, said, “I can’t go to the concert, but I’ll be with you in spirit.” The woman responded, “Good. Where would your spirit like to sit, main floor or balcony?” She called him to accountability and showed him that sympathy without action is empty. Sorta like the Book of James says: You show your faith by your actions.

The fence of prayer, of worshipful feeling, and connection with our God about that person’s need, that devotional-time glow that never grows hands or feet? It’s a fence around our love, isn’t it?

Those who lift up the grace of God in our salvation (“We inherit eternal life because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is God’s free gift to us.) [those who lift up the grace of God in our salvation] are exactly right. The death and resurrection of Christ are God’s free gift . . . that’s the Gospel. However . . . we need to hear carefully the response of Jesus. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Love the Lord, and your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus responded. “Do this and you will live.”

Alongside the words of Paul, you and I need to place the words of James. He says, “Some will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith

apart from your works, and I, *by my works*, will show you my faith.” He continues, “You see, a person is justified by works, and not by faith alone.”

When we say with a radiant shout, “I have accepted the amazing love of God. I’ve asked Jesus into my life,” we need then to hear the question of Jesus coming to us also. “Good. I am truly glad you are saved. Now, what are you saved for? What are you going to make of your salvation in my world? Which neighbor are you showing the love of God to? You are *saved* now, and the angels in heaven dance and sing about it. What are you now doing with that salvation I have given you?”

What fences are we jumping over, or just plain breaking down, huh?