

Based on Matthew 18:15-20
15th Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Robert Frost wrote, in his poem "Mending Fences," the famous line "good fences make good neighbors." But the poem itself questions this received wisdom and speaks to the unnaturalness of walls generally. People throughout time have sought to isolate themselves behind walls and to insulate themselves from whatever lies beyond. Though they are certainly useful for confining your kids, your pets, or your livestock; from the walls of Jericho to the Berlin Wall, walls and barriers have been far less useful at keeping the things we fear out.

Frost's poem opens with the line, "something there is that doesn't love a wall." And the poem itself speaks of two neighbors working together to rebuild a stone wall that winter and mother nature have tumbled down. Though I don't think Frost was especially theological in his thinking, I do believe this poem hits at an important truth concerning God; that God isn't especially interested in building barriers between people. The story of Jesus that the Gospels tells is a story of bringing down barriers, of opening up the love of God for all people.

But given humanity's repeated, if flawed, love of building walls it should be no surprise that this passage from Matthew's gospel has been interpreted in such a way that supports efforts to "wall off" the people of God from the world. The three-step process Jesus describes here isn't so much about enforcing rules or modifying behaviors as it is about working towards reconciliation. The role of the "one or two others" or the whole assembly is to hold *both* parties to account, to help them bridge whatever gap has been exposed in their disagreement.

But mostly it is the last step that so many people have misapplied. If the community upholds one party in the dispute over another and reconciliation isn't possible, Jesus tells us that the "offender" should be treated like a "Gentile and tax collector."

As much as some might like to see this as a just punishment of the offender; I really think we need to ask ourselves – how *are* we supposed to treat Gentiles and tax collectors?

Perhaps this passage from earlier in Matthew's gospel might tell us;

"As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'" (Matt 9:9-13)

We are supposed to treat the offender with mercy. When someone's behavior separates them from the body of Christ; we aren't supposed to heap disdain on them, treat them poorly, or wish them ill – we are supposed to be merciful and continue to work to bring them back within the saving embrace of Christ.

Of course, our communities need boundaries; clear expectations of what it means to be among God's people, and we need to hold each other to account for the ways we do and do not live into our baptismal promises. At the same time, we aren't meant to hide from the world behind our walls or to shun those who stumble; our job is to help guide people through the boundaries which define our community so that they might live happily and peaceably within the community of God's people.

Frost was right, and the example of Jesus confirms it; "something there is that doesn't love a wall."