

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

We live in a world of walls, and everyday walls are important to our lives. A wall separates the inside from the outside, indoors from outdoors. Walls give us privacy and protection. At work and at home, walls define our personal space. Throughout our lives, we are aware how walls enclose special places, such as a place of worship, or a museum, or a concert hall. Walls exist for our benefit—they help to keep us human.

Walls come and go. When you want to play basketball in this room, you have to move that large wall (point). Many of us remember President Reagan standing at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin saying, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Our country is presently trying to build a wall between us and Mexico. Israel is trying to build a similar wall. Russia is presently trying to move the “wall” between itself and Georgia. The Mason-Dixon line just to our north used to separate the North and the South when our own country was divided.

As with all good things, however, walls can be misused. They can become barriers between people. They can be used to restrict certain areas from certain types of people. In other words, walls exclude as well as enclose. The same walls that protect us can leave someone who needs us out in the cold. The early church had to come to terms with a “wall” before it could reach out to the world. More on that in a moment.

All three of the scripture readings we just heard deal with the universal aspects of the all-embracing love of God. In the first reading, Isaiah (chapter 56) talks about the time when the Hebrews returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon and discovered that things had changed. Foreigners were living there! People outside the faith of Israel were calling Jerusalem home. The prophet calls upon his people to be open to these strangers and to their inclusion in the worship of God: “...*their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*” The irony is that the Hebrews themselves had once been a band of wanderers, and their name most likely came from a word meaning “strangers.”

Romans (chapter 11) finds Paul distressed by Israel's rejection of Jesus as the messiah. Paul became known as the "apostle to the Gentiles", and he knew that Christ had come for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. He grieved that God's inclusive love in Christ had been rejected by many of his own Jewish colleagues.

The gospel reading from Matthew (chapter 15) can sound very strange if we do not understand the larger context of this material. The early church was rife with conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The question of whether Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming converts to Judaism threatened to destroy the early Christian community. Paul, the missionary to the Gentile world, and Peter, who sided with the Jewish-Christian perspective, might never have resolved their differences had a dramatic vision on a rooftop in Joppa not convinced Peter of his error.

The account of Jesus healing a Canaanite woman's daughter in the gospel today is no doubt preserved as an example of Jesus reaching out to both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus even initially reflects in his remarks the everyday hostility that existed between Jews and foreigners they considered heathens. But in the end, the woman's faith breaks down the walls of hatred and prejudice. The tribute Jesus pays to the Canaanite woman is really amazing.

There was a wall in the Jerusalem temple that divided the inner court, which was open only to Jews, from the outer court, which was open to Gentile visitors. The sanctuary of the temple was accessible only to those who were sanctified by membership in the holy race of Israelites. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that there were inscriptions at regular intervals along this wall, warning Gentiles not to enter the inner court on penalty of death.

In 70 AD, the city of Jerusalem and its beloved temple were destroyed. The Romans did not leave "*one stone standing on another*" (Matthew 24), as Jesus predicted. Because of the dedication of Paul and Peter, empowered as they were by the Holy Spirit, the wall of separation and exclusion that some were building in the early church was taken down. The church was able to affirm that Christ is the cornerstone of a new temple, Christ's own church, with no dividing

walls of hostility or discrimination. Christ himself is the peace that binds all of his followers together as a spiritual “*dwelling place of God in the Spirit*” (Ephesians 2).

Unfortunately, this dramatic story from the New Testament was not the end of wall building in Christ’s church or among God’s people. God’s own architectural design of a temple without walls has been compromised many times. Twenty centuries later, look at all the walls. We have the institutional walls of denominationalism, sectarianism, and factionalism. Catholics are distinct from Orthodox , who are distinct from Protestants. The Episcopal Church in the United States currently faces the possibility of more walls and divisions being created as they struggle with the issues of homosexuality and the ordination of women.

In the church generally we still have racist walls, and sexist walls, and economic walls. Much more insidious, however, are the invisible walls we sometimes build at the local level, individually and personally. Every community takes on certain personality, and it is so important that we pay attention to the walls which are sometimes created. I am happy to report that the most universal remark at our new parishioner welcoming sessions is that people feel welcome here at Saint Katharine Drexel. That is great to hear, but we have to always be working at creating a community without walls. Once a month, when we are formally invited to greet our neighbors before Mass starts, we are practicing a behavior which should just come naturally to us each week.

I think one of the reasons so many people are drawn to the Olympics is that the whole world is welcome. Any person from any nation could win a Gold Medal. The world is searching for this kind of unity, where there is a place for everyone. When Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God, he had the same kind of image in mind. Christ’s people need to be inclusive because Christ’s gospel is inclusive. And I am sure that God is pleased with a loving and inclusive community because there is a place there for every child of God who is made in the image and likeness of God.

Whenever we can, whenever we are presented with the opportunity, perhaps we could join President Reagan in saying, “*Tear that wall down!*” That’s what Jesus did so often.