

Walls

2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22

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We've been following David's story this summer. He has gone from shepherd boy to shepherd king of all Israel. He has captured the capital city of Jerusalem and returned the ark of God to the center of his power base and to the center of the people's lives. Now it is time for David to settle down. David has now settled down in his house and you can almost picture him there: the furniture is all arranged, the pictures are hung on the walls, and the kitchen cabinets and drawers are organized. David is settled, perhaps stretched out on his sofa, pillows all around, with his feet propped up on the coffee table. He is sipping wine and looking out of his big picture window onto the streets of Jerusalem. He doesn't have to cast an anxious eye at the city walls. All is well for David. God has given David not only this new capital city; not only this new house; God has also given David rest from all of his enemies. Life is good, as the T-shirt says.

Life is so good in his house, in fact, that it gives David an idea...why should he have this nice cedar house when all God has for a dwelling place is a old portable ark in a tent. It's worn and dinged in places—hardly a fit dwelling place for so great a God! David decides he will build God a house, too, one more in keeping with God's glory. Nathan, who is mentioned here for the first time, is a prophet; part of David's trusted cabinet. When David mentions his idea to Nathan about building a house for God, Nathan tells him to go for it, since obviously he is in God's favor.

But there is a problem with David's well-intentioned plan. God does not *want* a house. Nathan learns this from God in the dark of the night. He'll have to deliver God's message to David—and this will not be the only time that will happen. God says that he has never wanted a house and furthermore has never asked for one. In fact, God has intentionally been a God on the move with a people on the move. God has been free to move among the people of Israel from Egypt to the wilderness into the Promised Land and ever since. Moreover, God says, "I have moved with David, too, from the pasture in Bethlehem to that valley full of Philistines to this city of Jerusalem. I'm building the house of David...it is not the other way around!"

David's son, Solomon, will go on to build a most impressive temple for God, but here God is not interested in being "housed," even by the likes of the beloved, bestowed David. I suspect God knows that when we locate God in a specific place of certain dimensions, be it temple or church or our own minds, then we fashion for ourselves a god who becomes "domesticated;" controlled, too narrowly defined, too "understandable."

One of my favorite books of all time is called *Mister God, This is Anna*, by an author simply known as “Fynn.” It is the remarkable story of a little girl adopted off the streets of London by a man named Fynn and his mother. The book tells of this little girl’s extraordinary, sometimes mind-bending understanding of “Mister God” as she calls God, and of our intended life in him. At one point, Anna tells Fynn that Mister God is big and we’re little. This means that the difference between us and God is very big. And the more we learn, God just gets bigger and bigger. Then she asked: “Why do we go to church, Fynn?”

“To understand Mister God more,” Fynn replied.

“Less.” Anna said. “Less what?” “To understand Mister God less,” she said.

He told her she was flipped. “No,” Anna insisted. “You go to church to make Mister God really, really big. When you make Mister God really really *really* big, then you really *really* don’t understand Mister God—then you do.”

Fynn was confused. So, Anna spelled it out. She explained that when you are little, you understand Mister God. He sits up there on a big throne with a crown and everyone sings hymns like mad to God. You ask God for things, she says, and God “can strike your enemies deader than a doornail and is pretty good at putting hexes on the bully next door. “Mister God,” she says, “is so ‘understandable,’ so useful and so usable,” that God becomes like a sort of object. And even if God is the most important object of all, nevertheless God has become an object. This diminishes God’s size. God becomes an understandable entity among other understandable entities.

But along the way, Anna says, God does not always respond or “perform” the way we expect or prefer...until the time comes when you admit freely and honestly that you don’t understand God at all. And then, Anna says, you actually *do* understand God...for you have let God be his proper size, which is infinite. (I told you it was mind-bending!)ⁱ

I think God wanted David, who was so good at conquering things: people and cities and symbols, not to “conquer” God also for the people of Israel. Not to build walls around God, no matter how big and impressive and beautiful those walls might be. God is bigger still. What seems to suit God better is a portable ark in a tent; a tent with flexible fabric wall flaps that allow the wind to blow in, through and around, and out again into the world.

We human beings tend to be partial to walls. High, strong, impressive walls, with gates. Our inclination to build walls causes difficulties not only with God, but with one another. Last year I read a book entitled *The Big Sort* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008). In it, Bill Bishop lays out the story of how America came to be a country of swelling cultural division, economic separation, and political polarization. He and sociologist Robert Cushing take us beyond the familiar red state/blue state analysis. They use statistics and other insights to show how we have sorted

ourselves geographically, economically, and politically into like-minded communities over the past three decades.

This is a problem, they point out, because when we live in only like-minded groups, these communities can become more extreme and more certain in their perspectives and beliefs. The whole idea of democracy, they say, was that people of differing beliefs, viewpoints, convictions, and circumstances would interact with each other constantly. We'd have to listen to each other, debate, and work out a common life. Instead, for the last 30 years especially, we have been building walls of enclosed homogeneity instead.

The book takes aim at the church, too. They talk about ministers who have built mega-churches in suburbs, explicitly using the "homogeneous unit principle." They research the common traits and habits of people in a certain geographic region and build a church to suit the lifestyles and preferences of that specific group. Bishop says that not just mega-churches, but many of our churches today are the religious equivalent of gated communities!

Robert Frost's famous poem, *Mending Wall*, begins: *Something there is that doesn't love a wall...* But his neighbor sees it differently: *Good fences make good neighbors*, he says, as the two of them go along, replacing the fallen rocks, rebuilding the wall between them. And we shouldn't be too simplistic about the need for set boundaries. After all, if there are no property lines, neighbors feud. If there are no personal boundaries then everything becomes personalized and confused and unhealthy. Walls, fences, boundaries then are not always bad or wrong, but have that potential, so deserve our careful thought, re-examination from time to time, and perhaps some re-drawing or re-working of the height or length or width of the divides.

This is the notion Robert Frost wishes he could put in his neighbor's head. He muses: *Before I built a wall I'd ask to know What I was walling out, And to whom I was like to give offence. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants it down.*

God, it seems, has an issue with walls—especially walls that are built of hostility. Constructed out of hate or suspicion or disregard. In fact, Christ tears down these hostile walls...walls that separate people from one another and from God, too. As this passage from Ephesians says, Jesus Christ is able to bring together those who were once far off and those who are near. He makes people who were in completely different "boxes," who have lived on very different, even hostile, sides of walls...Christ is able to make one new humanity in place of the two.

This was one of the most shocking aspects of the early Christian church. The church arose in the midst of a culture that had very clear dividing lines in terms of gender, race, economic status, social standing, religious tradition and habits. These markers placed people in specific "boxes" of possibility, walled them off from each other, from any future other than the one pre-determined by their station in life. So, imagine how shocked the neighbors of that congregation in

Ephesus must have been! Rich and poor, men and women and children, too, in the same homes, eating at the same tables, sharing their possessions, worshipping together! Jews and Gentiles in the same place, sharing food, serving and singing praise to their common Lord!

That kind of oneness, that kind of a new humanity seems impossible for us. In fact, I'd venture to say that it mostly *is* impossible for us. But it is not impossible for God. You and I construct partial peace at best...a kind of uneasy, never-quite-settled *détente* is often the best we can do between nations at odds over nuclear weapons or oil or human rights; between states like Georgia Alabama and Florida over issues like water; and sometimes in our own marriages and families because of hurts, misunderstandings, and differences ancient or repeated or fresh. The peace we make always seems fragile. But God's peace is not impossible. In fact, Ephesians tells us that this peace is already present, real, and accomplished among us. The dividing walls of hostility are already broken down. Because, the writer of Ephesians says, *Christ himself is our peace*. In Christ, we are no longer strangers and aliens—to God or to one another. We are fellow citizens of God's realm. We are members of God's household.

God must be very big to be able to make that happen. God's household, God's temple, God's realm must be very, very big indeed to incorporate so many different people into this new humanity!

That kind of big, open peace too often makes us afraid. So we keep building walls. Making God smaller and ourselves smaller still. Some of our walls are mental or emotional or metaphorical, but there are plenty of examples of real walls, too. There are the hundreds of miles of fencing we have been constructing across the southwest border between Arizona and Mexico. Homeland Security has even spent \$20 million on "Project 28," a "virtual fence" across 28 miles in Arizona. It hasn't worked too well, with technical mistakes in software that cannot distinguish between sagebrush, camping migrants and animals. There is a "Separation Wall" in Israel that cuts through a monastery's wall in Bethany. And since 2003 Bethlehem has been contending with a "Separation Wall" that runs the length of the West Bank, separating Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Christians. The separation and hostility are symbolized by the 30 ft. high wall itself.

Christ is our peace? Ask Claire Anastas, who lives in Bethlehem, about that. The wall made her family's car repair business impossible. So she has started making Bethlehem's traditional olive-wood carvings and selling them on the Internet. Her most popular item, she says, is a nativity scene with a wall running through it. "This symbolizes the situation here," she says.

I looked it up and the set is advertized this way: "A Nativity set with a difference—this year the wise men won't get to the stable. Poignant, ironic and made in Bethlehem." Claire notes that the wall is removable for those Christmas shoppers who want a more festive display. If you buy the large set, a palm tree is included to replace the wall for a more traditional look.

Yet, Christ is our peace. He has come to break down the dividing walls of hostility between us. To bring those far off and those near together, making of us one new humanity. Not where our differences are obliterated. Jews did not become Gentiles and Gentiles did not become Jews, after all. But they did become Christians together...with a common way of life made possible by Jesus Christ.

In fact, this passage from Ephesians ends with the astonishing claim that in Christ, we are being joined together so that *we* grow into a holy temple. Do you see the surprising twist this passage takes? It says that God does not dwell in some building, no matter how big and impressive and beautiful its walls might be. But that we are joined and grow together spiritually, *we* become a dwelling place for God. As an acquaintance of mine put it, the church is not a place for *parishioners* to come into, but instead is the household where *God* chooses to live!ⁱⁱ

Now that is a challenge, an awesome calling for people, for Presbyterians, who are partial to building walls. Our own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Order echoes this verse from Ephesians. It is my favorite quote in the whole document. It says in Chapter 3 that: **The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity.** (Did you get that? *We* are the provisional demonstration of what God intends!) **The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.**

The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world: (where)

- 1. Sin is forgiven.**
- 2. Reconciliation is accomplished.**
- 3. The dividing walls of hostility are torn down.**

The Book of Order goes on to say that in our life together here in the church, and in our individual lives, too, we are **called to give shape and substance to this truth.** So, the question is worth considering. Do the people who hang out here among us at Emory Presbyterian Church, or as they spend time with us individually, do they/will they see in us this new reality, the new humanity revealed in Jesus Christ? *Are* we a provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity? Are we as a church growing spiritually into a fit dwelling place for God?

ⁱFynn, *Mister God, This is Anna* (Collins Fountain Paperbacks, 1974), 116-118.

ⁱⁱ Edwin Searcy's Homiletical Essay on this passage in **Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3** (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 258.