

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Seventh Sunday of Easter (6/2), 2019

Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

When I was in seminary, there was a license on one of my colleague's car which read, "TAMBO." In fact his read "TAMBO1" and his wife's read, "TAMBO2."

I always thought it had something to do with a dance of which I hadn't heard or something like that, but, one day, we happened to be sitting next to each other at lunch, and I ask him what "TAMBO" meant and why it was important enough to him to put on his license plates.

He replied, "Well, it stands for Jesus' words from the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel. That all may be one..." He went on to say that it struck him that these words...what might be thought of as Jesus' valediction to his disciples on his last night with them...seemed to sum up so very much of Jesus' life and the new life he came to bring.

I smiled politely and inwardly thought, "Well that's a nice thought, but the license plates are a bit much."

I hadn't really thought so much about that rather ancient exchange until I was watching the news some many years ago and saw the wall being erected between Israel and Palestine. It, in turn, reminded me of the wall that separated Berlin for so many years...about the figurative walls being erected by tanks and armed soldiers between various factions in Iraq and Afghanistan...about walls around gated communities throughout this country...about fences I have seen surrounding low income housing developments in this country and in Britain...about emotional walls I have erected to keep others out...and on and on.

I wonder, if Jesus' valediction to his disciples was that they learn to be one with another...to seek manners in which to end division and mistrust...hatred and enmity...I wonder if we have made much of a success of it?

I suppose the image of the fence says a great deal about how humanity has handled such things. Rather than seeking the unity Christ prays for, humanity seems to deal with the matter simply by the convenient manner of building a wall...keeping people apart so that they cannot possibly be one...but, at the same time convincing themselves that they have made it a safer place to be because someone they do not care for is kept away...at arms length...on the other side of the wall.

Paul and Silas, in today's reading from Acts, found out the hard way that if you cross the wall into Rome...or, in this case, Roman territory...you dang well better do it as they do in Rome or there is a good chance of ending up beaten and thrown in jail. The wall is there to keep other manners of thought and living and understanding from getting in. It is there

to make certain that those inside are safe from the possibility that there may be more than one manner in which to live, and that there might just possibly be a number of possibilities...each one valid and acceptable to God.

Christ didn't just tell his disciples that all should be one. He showed them how to do it...he showed them a life of service...of self-giving...of seeking to bring to their fullest potential those whose paths he crossed...of sacrifice...and, yes, uncertainty...and even pain. He did it because he knew that was the only manner that some sort of union...of oneness...of common understanding...might be achieved. He never said it would be easy or comfortable or socially acceptable or conferring of power and prestige on the instigator...but he did say it was that which dwelt at the heart of God.

It is said that Robert Frost, in response to the annual statement by his neighbor, as the neighbor repaired a fence between their two properties, that, "Good fences make good neighbors"...it is said it is then Frost wrote,

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall.  
Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out  
And to whom I was like to give offense.*

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall  
That wants it down.*

If we do not find ways to break down the walls that separate us, they will only grow thicker...firmer...and less able to be breached...almost as if they grow in some organic fashion.

We will not be one...but, increasingly many...divided, separated, shouting across the barricade, "No, I'm right, and you are not;" "No, my way is correct, and yours is wrong;" "No, I am normal, and you are abnormal;" "No, I am acceptable, and you are unacceptable;" "No, I deserve to be treated with respect, and you do not;" "No, I am human, and you are less than human;" "No, Christ can be seen in me but not in you;" and finally "No, I am created in the image and likeness of God, and you are not!"

What walls must we each begin to break down? I suspect we each know. Surely God does...and, even more surely, Christ calls us to such breaking down regardless of what it costs.

Not to do it will, one day, destroy us and all that is precious in this life. To do it, will, one wall at a time, begin to make us one.