

“A Kingdom Without Walls”

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based on the theme, “LIVING THE QUESTIONS”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Galatians 3:25-29 [NRSV]

²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

When I think of kingdoms, I think of castles and walls. I think of images like the one on the cover of our bulletin. In the heyday of castles, I guess in feudal Europe, peasants worked and lived outside the walls. When danger came or the Mongol hordes or the Barbarian warlords were bearing down, the peasants would run and hide behind the castle walls, protected by the lord of the manor, so to speak. So walls are a source of defense and security. They keep us safe within, while they keep the enemy out. Was it Mark Twain who said good fences make for good neighbors?

But at the same time, the very thing that makes walls desirable can also be the thing that makes them an obstacle to something better. We might be tempted to put up walls where they are not needed. We may consider someone an enemy who is not. We may use a wall to keep out those the Lord of the manor wants to have come in. The problem with

kingdoms is they often seem like something that holds a treasure we must defend and protect from those who don’t deserve to share in its wealth, protection, and blessings.

Jesus came talking about the Kingdom of God. Our temptation is to believe that is something exclusive and separatist. Indeed that is the way Christianity has generally talked about it. Only certain folks get in. Only the approved are allowed. We talked about it as if faith were somehow something that we earned instead of a gift, as the Scriptures say. We have often conceived of the Kingdom of God as a kind of holy country club, with initiation rites, fees, and, of course, any welcome was subject to one having the correct “bona fides.” In some ways, it makes sense. The Scriptures talk about how God is “holy,” and therefore, since we are not, we should not be allowed to sully God’s holiness with our unholiness. But then I go back

and look at those whom Jesus hung out with.

Jesus talked a lot about the Kingdom of God, but he also spent a lot of time breaking down walls. He was heavily criticized for it. He was accused of eating and drinking with sinners. Observers were scandalized by his public conversation with a woman by a well. Religious leaders were convinced he was violating the holiness laws because of his actions on the Sabbath. He touched and allowed those to touch him who were “untouchable.” He went into foreign land and had table fellowship with foreigners. Again and again, Jesus went over, around, or just plain broke down spiritual walls that had been created to keep God safe from outsiders. Maybe it is time we began to rethink this Kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about.

In the Living the Questions series this past week the topic was “A Kingdom Without Walls.” It invited us to consider whom we want to keep out and let in versus whom God wants to keep out or let in. It challenged our boundaries. Our discussion afterward also challenged us to think about whom we would welcome and who we might not be so comfortable welcoming as a church. There was a good, honest spirit about the difficulties each of us might face with certain types of people.

And maybe that is the key. Maybe as long as we look at people as types of people rather than as individuals beloved by God we will always have trouble with “certain types of people.” I find that every time I want to pigeonhole someone into a particular box or type, if I try to

learn something about them or from them my assumptions are proven wrong. But that’s what “stereotyping” does. That is what prejudice is. It is the assumption that someone fits a certain expectation we have about a “type” of person.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians was a scathing letter of correction to a bunch of Christians who had gone down the wrong path. He calls them foolish and asks if they have been bewitched because they want laws to define the faith and its practice. They want clear rules about being a faithful follower. They have even allowed leaders other than Paul get them to go back to old ways of practicing their religion. All this makes Paul hopping mad. In their efforts to purify their religion, in their attempts to be qualified as worthy or holy in God’s presence they have set up a lot of walls about who can and who can’t get in. In response Paul says, “don’t you get it? In Christ there is no east or west, no slave nor free, no male nor female, for we are all one in Christ.” If we follow his thinking we would have to add things like married nor single, old nor young, gay nor straight, rich nor poor,” and probably a dozen other opposites that we could think of that we use as ways to divide ourselves into good and bad.

But churches are always fighting over who are the sheep and who are the goats, using an unfortunate metaphor from one of Jesus’ parables. Interestingly enough in that particular parable the sheep and goats were defined by who acted in a Godly way, as opposed to what their social status might be. One writer points out that the church has always used the argument that certain people ought

not to be allowed inside the Christian wall unless they change. For example, at one time, the wisdom of the church taught that if one thought the world was not flat one was excommunicated. In its wisdom the church taught that seizures and mental illness was a sign of demon possession and sought to torture and lock up such individuals. Indeed, left-handedness was considered a sign of evil in accordance with some interpretation of the literal meaning of Scripture. So the church taught that such people should be converted or, if they were not, that torture or at least shunning was the proper course of action. Oh, and of course, there was that time when many in the church condoned slavery as “okay by Paul - okay by me.” So when it is clear that we are using human stereotypes and prejudices in Scripture as the word of God to build walls, let’s be careful. More often than not we have found out how wrong we were, and had to correct our course.

Here at Arlington Congregational Church we have a vision statement. I don’t know how many of you realize this but we read it at every Core Ministry meeting. It isn’t just something we wrote and then put away. The start of it says, “Arlington Congregational Church will be a dynamic Christian Church that reaches out to all people and bids them come and worship God.” Now there are two things at work in that statement. One, it says we will “reach out to all people.” Reaching out is a verb. It is something we need to do. I want to remind you, as we come into the high holy season of Easter, that many people are looking for a spiritual home where they would be truly welcome. They have

been to, or at least heard about, all those churches where they would not feel welcome. Studies show that 90% of those who come to a church come because someone invited them – a friend, coworker, neighbor, or family member. So we need to reach out, we cannot be complacent or satisfied saying, I like the church to be small, or I don’t want us to grow too big. We don’t have to worry about that. What we have to worry about is whether we are doing what Christ would have us do, and whether we are fulfilling our vision as a church.

The second thing the vision statement reminds us of is that we must be ready to welcome anyone who comes. That means we have to get past fear and hate and prejudice and other assumptions about “types” of people. We may have come to this church because at one time or another we needed comfort, but God didn’t call us to this church to make us comfortable. God called us to offer comfort in the sense of compassion, to be willing to “suffer with” those who are hurting. But then we are called to be about compassion for others, service in love to others, inviting others to discover the love of God. So that means we have to get past complacency for one thing, and the walls we put up for another.

The movie, “Remember the Titans,” tells the story of a high school football team in Alexandria, Virginia at the time of integration. The conflict between the African-American players and the white players seemed almost insurmountable. The hatred and fear ran so deep that it seemed they would never come together as a team. But two of the star defensive players finally speak the

truth to each other and start to forge a relationship. At the turning point in the movie the white player, who had been paralyzed in a car accident and was in a hospital bed, looks at the African-American player who has become his friend and says, "all the time I was hating you, I didn't realize I was hating my brother." In response the African-American player says, "I'm going to tell you what we're going to do. When we get old we're going to move out and live side by side and get old and fat and sit on our rocking chairs on the front porch together and rock and there won't be none of this black-white stuff anymore." I think that is a vision of the Kingdom of God, for sure.

It is easy to see what makes us different. It is easy to assume that if we are "in Christ" all those differences somehow disappear. But that isn't what Paul means, nor what Christ desires. When he says there is no longer married or single, gay or straight, white or black in Christ, Paul doesn't mean those things go away. Someone at the Living the Questions session Wednesday night said it best. They said, it means we get over them. We cannot afford hatred or fear.

In another movie, "Places in the Heart," Sally Fields plays a woman is married to the town Sheriff and they live on a small farm. The Sheriff has to arrest a young black man and in the midst of it, the young man shoots and kills the Sheriff by accident. The KKK hangs the young black man before he can be tried. The woman now has to try to keep her family together by bringing in the crops herself. The only way she can make it, and not lose the farm, is if she is the first

to bring her cotton to gin. The operator of the gin will pay a bonus to the first one to bring in their bales, and it will take the extra money to save the farm. She has no one to help her but she takes in a blind man as a renter and hires a black man to help her bring in the crop. The KKK tries to run him off and it turns out that some of them are her competitors trying to beat her in the contest for the bonus money.

In short, the movie is full of the kinds of conflict that come from there being a world full of differences and walls and separation. But at the end of the movie, after the cotton is brought in the camera opens on the small church in the town. As the people are singing, the camera pans down the rows of pews. There is Sally Fields and beside the black sharecropper that has helped her bring in the crop. Then, surprisingly the camera pans and we see her husband, and next to him the young man who had accidentally shot him, and next to him the members of the KKK. It dawns on us that this is the filmmaker's metaphor for the Kingdom of God. In God's kingdom we will sit side-by-side with those we thought were our enemies who were truly our brothers and sisters.

It is hard to overcome old walls. But Christ came to tear down the walls that we might all come into fellowship with God. He came that we might know the Kingdom of God is a kingdom without walls, because God doesn't need them to defend himself or us. God isn't trying to keep anyone out or in. God is simply welcoming anyone who would like to know they have a place waiting for them, a place in his heart. AMEN.