

Fences

(Reflection shared by Rev Bain Milroy at Peterborough Presbytery, February 3, 2010)
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During my theological studies I was a student minister at Allenford and Park Head Pastoral Charge, a two point charge located at the base of the Bruce Peninsula. Most of the funerals I did were handled by Downs Funeral Home in Hepworth. Jack Downs and his son ran the business consisting of a furniture store, barber shop and funeral home. On occasion, Jack and I would visit after a service. Jack and his family were Roman Catholics. One day he told me of a visit he had from his priest. The priest had been informed by his superior that they thought a fence should be erected between the Protestant and Catholic parts of the Cemetery in Hepworth. He wanted Jack's opinion.

Jack said to him. "Father, we work with these people, we live in the community with them, we socialize with them and we do business with them. We may go to different churches on Sunday but we are all a part of this community and we get along. We have been burying people in this cemetery for over a hundred years without any fence and I can see no useful purpose or need for such a fence. If you put a fence in, all it will achieve is to create divisions. Whereupon the priest picked up the phone, called his superior and said, "There'll be no darn fence." ... and there is no darn fence.

When Jesus, the hometown boy, read from the scroll of Isaiah, the local synagogue crowd was rather impressed. He told them "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The people perhaps felt proud of themselves and that Jesus was complimenting them, thinking them special. Then as they thought a little more, someone said "Wait a minute, this Jesus is Joe and Mary's son, he's no big deal, why are some of you so taken with him?" The fence of family heritage was erected. Then Jesus accuses them of just being there for a sideshow of miracles. But he doesn't stop there, he goes on stating "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." If that wasn't enough to get everybody's nose out of joint, Jesus' declaration that God loved Gentiles as much as he loved Jews, thoroughly enraged the people of his home town. All of a sudden the fence of racism was erected. "How dare this young Jesus, this hometown boy preach like this to us! Who does he think he is?" Perhaps the fence of agism creeping in? What's all this stuff about God accepting the Gentiles? Doesn't he know that we're God's chosen people? If the Messiah comes, he's coming for us. He's going to favour us, not the Gentiles. Now we have the fence of superiority firmly implanted.

Jesus refused to classify people by race, culture, or any other lines. He did not categorize folk as either pure or impure, righteous or unrighteous, worthy churchgoers or unworthy outsiders, Israelites or pagan Gentiles, God's people or the unwashed mob. His love was radically inclusive.

The biggest challenge confronting us today is that of facing our differences, of accepting ... truly accepting ... otherness. This challenge confronts us at every level: social, political, cultural, moral, religious. Most of us claim to accept otherness and difference, but when we're honest, the reality isn't nearly as easy as the rhetoric. The

simple fact is that otherness frightens us and often brings out the worst in us. It's not easy to be comfortable, at home, welcoming, to what's different and seemingly deviant. More often than not we try to put up fences against it. We see that today in the rise of fundamentalism and paranoia of every kind. Everywhere there seems to be an excessive itch to circumscribe, to reign-in, to exclude, to punish anyone or anything that doesn't fit our mold, all of which are simply other phrases for "circling the wagons". Building fences.

During World War I, a Protestant chaplain with the American troops in Italy became a friend of a local Roman Catholic priest. In time, the Protestant chaplain moved on with his unit and later was killed by the enemy. The priest heard about his friend's death. He asked the military authorities for permission to bury his friend's body in his church cemetery. Permission was granted. But the priest ran into a problem with his own Roman Catholic Church authorities. They were sympathetic, but they said they could not approve the burial of a non-Catholic body in a Catholic cemetery. So, the priest buried his friend's body just outside the cemetery fence.

Years later, an American veteran made a sentimental journey back to Italy. He knew what had happened in the village. He visited the old priest who was still the pastor of the church in that place. The first thing the veteran did was to ask to see the grave of the Protestant chaplain. When they walked out to the cemetery, the veteran was surprised to find the grave was now inside the fence. "Ah," he said, "I see you got permission to move the boy." No," said the priest. "They told me where I couldn't bury the body. But nobody ever told me I couldn't move the fence!"

Jesus came into the world to "move the fence." He's still "moving the fence." He would like everyone to be inside the fence. Whether we are insiders or outsiders, Jews or Gentiles, male or female, gay or straight, rich or poor, we are all chosen by God. God loves us and offers grace to one and all. For that, thanks be to God.