



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I Tim. 1:2

Editor's Note: While I found it a bit disconcerting some 15 years ago to receive a gushing welcome letter from AARP, long before I had any inclination to retire, now the fact that Medicare people are buzzing about seems to mark some kind of irreversible passage. While I am grateful for the fervent interest in me by the government on some level, primarily financial, I am also a bit apprehensive about getting too close to them. I may be in denial, but I continue to hope against hope that I will not start acting my age. I am not prepared to go off to shuffleboard camp as of yet.

But in the midst of this existential angst, Pastor Mike came to the rescue. He invited me to stay on the pastoral staff of Lutheran Church of Hope even if I was cutting back and ramping down. We have worked out an arrangement where I will spend seven days a month at Hope, arriving most of the time on Monday morning and departing the following Sunday. This will continue my relationship at Hope and also give me more time with my wife, Jackie, our children and grandchildren.

Only one detail remains. Pastor Mike wanted me to sign a thirty-year contract, but I have been holding out for a sizeable signing bonus (in my dreams). Chris Gunnare came up with a compromise that would have the church paying the bonus upon completion of the 30 years, but somehow that doesn't seem very appealing.

At any rate, what this means is that I might not be able to publish two "Pastors Updates" a month. I will start with one and see how it goes. Also I hope to have more time for writing some books which are on my heart once I have more uninterrupted time, so I may also be able to write some of the Updates up north. I continue to appreciate the affirmation I receive for these bi-monthly musings.

Several years ago we took a journey during the fall months to the northeastern U.S., arriving in early October. Upstate New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine were decorated in brilliant color as the maple trees exploded into golds and oranges and reds. We especially were taken with the area around the Green Mountains of Vermont, spending several days just exploring every side road and turnoff.

In the midst of our meanderings we came upon a scenic little state park named after the poet Robert Frost, who had

lived only a mile or so from this locale. Paths had been cleared and benches placed at strategic points, with excerpts of his poems nearby. On one path there was the expected sign on a tree where the path divided, "The Road Not Taken." In a particularly bucolic setting, the immortal words of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" were to be found (miles to go before I sleep, miles to go before I sleep).

Ever since taking a poetry class in college, a favorite Frost poem of mine has been the one named "Mending Wall." Since the words from this poem are germane to what I want to say, I will print the poem in full. Read it through several times - each time something new appears that we have not seen before:

"Mending Wall" by Robert Frost

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors'.
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:*

*'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows?
But here there are no cows.
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 offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me~
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."*

I have always been struck by the words, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down. Before I build a wall I'd ask to know, What I was walling in or walling out. And to whom I was like to give offense."

I grew up in an America that had built very thick and impenetrable walls. Our churches were pretty much separated by nationality as well as by race, the Norwegians, Swedish, Danish, German, and Finnish Lutheran Churches. We were warned early and often to stay far away from Roman Catholics - the Pope wants to get his clutches on us. Evangelicals did not believe in infant baptism and some of them might even be "Holy Rollers," so best to keep behind our walls. Minorities were basically invisible to us. "Good fences make good neighbors," was a common mantra.

Church denominations down through the ages have devoted incredible energy and cost to building bigger walls. Church history describes manifold attempts to wall certain people in and certain people out. Even among Lutherans today the walls seem to be higher than ever, as we are unable to worship together, pray together, commune together.

Governments also create walls when all other creativity and common sense disappears. The Soviet Union divided Europe for more than 40 years in their paranoia and fear of interaction, until the wall was toppled. Now the only answer our country seems to have for the poor and destitute flocking to our borders is to build a huge wall several hundred miles long. Next it would be along the Canadian border, then perhaps a huge fence along both the east and west coast.

Perhaps we need to listen to Robert Frost, "Something

there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down. Before I build a wall I'd ask to know, What I was walling in or walling out. And to whom I was like to give offense."

The ELCA, since its formation in 1988, has been engaged in consistent wall building. The way we have done this is by paying far more attention to constitutions than the Bible. Our chosen way of wall construction is to take a controversial issue, any issue, and then bring it to a convention for a vote. If the resolution receives 51% it is adopted. The 49% is now relegated to second class citizenship. Winners and losers are created. Marginalization takes place. Walls are built. Instead of the hard work of building consensus, we take the easy road of simply voting on everything.

But there is something that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down. Before I build a wall I'd ask to know, What was I walling in or walling out. And to whom I was like to give offense.

Professor Mark Kolden from Luther Seminary wrote a paper suggesting we tear down the walls, and begin at a different point. Why don't we begin with those things about which there is widespread congregational consensus, no walls, and discover the joy in joining together. He mentions several of these no-brainers: Supporting the worldwide mission of Christianity, working to alleviate world hunger, advocating, equipping and supporting ministries for and with children, the elderly, the marginalized, the sick, the homeless, helping to start and support new congregations, helping to revitalize other churches, etc.

Instead the church has become just another legislative body, just another political entity where ungrace prevails and sharp elbows are everywhere. We are much better at building walls than tearing them down. "But there is something that does not love a wall, that wants it down." This led church analyst Lyle Schaller to suggest the reason there are almost no other Lutheran Church of Hopes in mainline denominations comes down to two words, "interdenominational squabbles." As long as our denominations continue to be a legislative body rather than a missional body, our congregations and church bodies will continue to decline. There is something that does not love a wall.

Let's give Robert Frost the last word from "The Road Not Taken." *"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by. And that has made all the difference."* It seems as if the Christian church today needs to take the road less traveled, the one which seeks to destroy walls rather than create new ones.