

Walls and Cairns

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Joshua 3-4

I Corinthians 3:10-14

Earlier this month our family was in Colorado for a week, staying just outside Rocky Mountain National Park. What a gift to the world this spot is. The blue sky, the thin air, the aspens with their undulating leaves – what cool shadows they make - the mountainous rocks with trees growing from improbable places.

I thought of rock climbers, Mark Nord and Wendell Landes, quite often as we passed through the rocky canyons. “Would they really climb this rock? How would they climb that one?” It wasn’t only big rocks that were part of our life during those seven days. The cabin where we stayed was on a gravel road, the paths we hiked were rock-strewn, and we balanced our way across rocky streams after picnic lunches on glacial boulders.

At some point during our vacation we read about cairns. Some of the glacial rocks are so big and wide that the path seems to disappear as you hike across them. When that happens one is instructed to look for a cairn, a small pile of rocks that shows where the path lies. We actually built more cairns than we saw but it got me thinking about rocks, in our lives and in the Bible.

One afternoon when we were worn out from hiking we visited with former members of Hyattsville Mennonite - Cathy Egan, Steve Ramer and Lea and Gabi. (Lorie Preheim and Tumaini happened to be visiting too.) We went to a large reservoir just outside of Ft. Collins to swim. Soon the children turned from swimming to building sandcastles. Where there is a sandcastle there has to be a wall to protect it, even when the waves are only small ones from passing boats. Elijah began gathering rocks from around the area and soon had a wall that was about 8 inches high and 25 feet long. I was fairly impressed by the wall and the work that it took to carry the heavy rocks. Elijah was nonchalant. “Mom, you can just walk right over it.”

Walls and Cairns. Built of the same materials and yet for quite different purposes.

In the story from Joshua that we told this morning during children's time, the descendents of Jacob build something more akin to a cairn than a wall. The children of Israel are preparing to make another crossing — this time out of the desert and into the Promised Land.

When they left Egypt, the waters parted and they crossed over into the desert. Now, as then, the waters part — but this time they cross into the land of promise. This time Joshua instructs them to take 12 rocks from the Jordan River, representing the 12 tribes, and pile them up so that future generations will know the place; the place where they experienced the power of God, the place where they crossed into the Promised Land. When children and grandchildren say, "What is that pile of stones?" it is a chance to pass on the faith, to tell of the amazing work that God did in leading them out of the desert and into the land of Canaan.

Walls. There are walls in the bible. The children of Israel are about to encounter one as they enter the new land. There's a big wall around Jericho, and as we know the walls will soon "come a tumblin' down."

Jezebel falls off a wall to her death; the walls of the temple are predicted to fall. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2 that Jesus came to break down the dividing walls of hostility. (As the walls fall a new humanity is created and there is peace.) I am hard pressed to find a time in the biblical text when we are encouraged to build walls instead of watch them crumble.

Yet we all build walls. One need not have a degree in engineering or be a contractor to build walls. The materials are not always brick, wood or straw bales. We build invisible walls that keep people away through barriers of race, class, age, sexuality or theology. We each know what else we might add to the list.

Juan Martinez, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, spoke at the gathering in San Jose in July. He called these walls

“social constructs.” We build them because we are afraid. People responded enthusiastically to his message as he said “Let us stop being afraid and start tearing down those walls.” With Jesus as the foundation, as Paul says in I Corinthians, we do not need to build those walls of fear. We can build households that include the strangers and the aliens. We do not need to build the wall along the border with Mexico. If we are not afraid of losing our comfortable way of life, there will be enough to share with others. If we are not afraid of other languages we can welcome people who speak Spanish or Swahili or even evangelicalism.

This is an era of wall building: Red State – Blue State, neo-con – liberal, pro-this – pro-that. On almost any issue there are likely to be vocal groups lobbing verbal hand grenades at each other across the dividing wall that has been built.

While we may try to stay out of the red and blue fray, we Mennonites still have walls. Our origins as a small and persecuted group, hunted by both the church and the state, have resulted in wall building. This was logical 500 years ago; there had to be some protection against infiltrators and spies. As a group that was reacting against what had been taught for centuries by the Catholic Church, as a group that was redefining what it meant to be Christian, there was a need to be clear, sure and pure in thinking and action. We were afraid for our lives. And so as we experienced God at work in the community, we built a protective wall around the church. The more persecution that came, the more rocks were added to the wall.

Five hundred years later we no longer fear the larger church and state, at least not in this country. We do not use tests to see whether people are true enough followers to become members. While we still encourage faithfulness to Christ and trustworthiness in the community, we do not need to hide behind walls of fear.

Mennonites are doing some creative wall busting to break down barriers of fear. Earlier this year a Christian group organized by Mennonites and Quakers traveled to Iran to meet with the Iranian president to work at building relationships of respect rather than hostility, silence and fear.

Mennonite Disaster Service has for years been building up homes demolished by floods or tornados while tearing down the walls of racism and classism. Many of you have worked with Mennonite Central Committee all over the world, building relationships while digging wells, staffing health clinics and teaching school. Most of the Mennonite colleges require their students to study in another country for a semester, to begin to understand other cultures and to break down stereotypes and misunderstandings.

We do fairly well at building up relationships and tearing down fear outside the church. But what about within the church? What happens in congregations, conferences and across the church as a denomination? There was a lot of talk about tearing down dividing walls at San Jose and yet I was also part of conversations there about the need for walls, the need for boundaries and the need for being clear about who is in and who is out. I wonder if those boundaries that were once essential to our survival may now lead to our demise unless we learn new uses for the rocks of our faith.

Sometimes in the church we need clear boundaries especially when power is abused and children are at risk. You may have additional criteria for boundary needs. While boundaries are of utmost importance to some within the church, there is not total agreement about what boundaries we should have and how or who to enforce them.

It is easy to get critical of those who build walls and boundaries, to disparage the guardians of the wall. It is tempting to knock down the wall, or at least make holes in it. But then all that we are left with is a pile of rubble without meaning.

What if instead of focusing on boundaries and wall building (or destroying walls) we begin to build cairns, small piles of meaning along the faith journey pointing the way for those who live beside us and for those who come after us. What if we tell stories and recite scripture, sing songs and write parables that speak of the times we see the work of God. At first cairn building may seem easier than wall building. But they both require commitment to faith and a recommitment of ourselves to following the way of Jesus.

After all, to build a cairn one must find the rocks. I must refocus my attention so that I see the work of God in my life each day. By naming the work of God I turn my experiences into rocks for the cairn.

Leaving a trail of cairns means walking the path myself, staying committed to the journey. You see how one might be tempted to stop journeying and use the rocks to build something more permanent. But cairn building means we have to stay mobile. We have to make the stories and faith come alive so there is something about which others wonder and ask questions.

As I describe these two metaphors for passing on the faith I find myself uncomfortable with the choice, build a wall or build a cairn. Is it really a choice between passing on a protected, pristine faith with upright, mended walls or passing on a messy, living faith with cairns along the way, markers that may be missed by passers by. Could it be possible that we need both walls and cairns, a journeying faith and a strong tradition?

I am reminded of the Robert Frost poem, *Mending Wall*, which Ned Wyse shared with us last fall at our annual retreat.

Here are two neighbors, one who is not so sure walls are needed, especially when there are no cows involved, and the other who can only recite back what he learned from his father, "good fences make good neighbors." These two farmers must learn to get along. Perhaps the first neighbor might be more inclined to build a cairn with the rocks that tumble off the stone wall each spring and yet he works with his neighbor across the fence to maintain the wall that hardly protects the pine trees from the apple trees. As Elijah said, "You can step right over it."

Walls and cairns. While cairn building may be a corrective to all the wall building we have done for hundreds of years, I wonder how we can make room for both walls and cairns. Can we as a larger church find room for both those who would maintain the walls and those who would take some of those stones and build small guideposts along the way? Is there room for those who want to preserve the tradition, teaching us our history as well as those who want to expand upon it? Is there room for those who experience God

in a traditional reading of scripture as well as those who are
“Wrestling with the Text” as the title suggests in a new book about the
faith of young adults?

Cairns and walls. Whether we are called to build walls or build
cairns let us learn to live together, perhaps even build together
sometimes, and may our foundation stone always be Jesus Christ.