

"BEFORE I BUILT A WALL"

Isaiah 66: 18-23

Second in a Series on  
The Meaning of Identity

by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Union Church of Manila

May 25, 1969

In 1914 Robert Frost wrote his great poem "Mending Wall".

"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 poem tells the story of the stone wall that divides his farm from his neighbors. Each spring the wall must be repaired and this yearly task, rebuilding the places that have collapsed, is the subject of the poem. Frost comes to the close of "Mending Wall" with these famous lines.

"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.'"

Robert Frost has raised a very important question about individual identity. He implies that there can be a dangerous sort of self-awareness and that we ought to be on the watch for it.

Identity, the sense of who I am and what I am worth, is one of the most vital Old Testament emphasis and we can learn a lot by watching the development of this theme throughout Old Testament history.

The theme begins with Abraham. He is chosen, blessed with the promise of God, granted worth by grace at Mt. Moriah. The theme is deepened with Moses who makes the discovery of the law of God. King David takes the scattered tribes of Israel

and welds them together and grants them a great city, Jerusalem. It is David that adds to the identity awareness of Israel a true sense of nationhood. Following David the fortunes of the Jewish people deteriorate, first with the civil war between Northerners and Southerners and then beginning at 710 BC the crushing blows of foreign nations that within 200 years will have completely destroyed the empire of David. The remnant that survived at Jerusalem was taken off to Babylon as prisoners; finally in 538 BC they are brought back by the Persians to live on their historic land, but now as tax paying vassals of the Persian Empire. It was during the terrible years of attack from the Assyrians and the Babylonians that the Old Testament prophets rose up among the people and in that period of about 200 years most of the Old Testament prophetic books were written. The political fortunes of Israel were down but the spiritual insight was at its greatest peak. During these hard years Isaiah and Jeremiah saw clearly a dimension to their chosenness and identity that had only been hinted at before their time. They saw the fact that God would bless the whole world in and through his chosen people and through the Messiah that would rise up from the Holy people of God.

" For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations. And they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring their cereal offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord.

For as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before me, says the Lord so shall your descendants and your name remain.

From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord."

-- Isaiah 66: 18-23

Note in the text the acknowledgement of the fact that the gift to Israel is to be universally enjoyed by all men, and Israel is to share in the spread of God's good gift.

But, following the years of the Babylonian captivity there begins the steady drift toward a narrow sense of identity. This drift is symbolized by the preoccupation of post-exile Israel with the wall, and the city itself and with preservation of their own physical uniqueness. (See Ezra, Nehemiah which are books of this period.) The people become obsessively preoccupied with the danger to them that is posed by foreigners. It is easy to understand how this drift began and even to sympathize with the gathering momentum that accelerated within the consciousness of Israel. As a process it continued to the first century, and revealed itself.

in a sharp suspicion of all outsiders.

This narrowing of the awareness of selfhood is racism. Racism is identity gone bad; it is the negative absolutization of what is really a positive value. It is identity with a wall around it. Racism has an inward and an outward manifestation:

(1) Racism always turns man in upon himself. He becomes foolishly pre-occupied with his own obvious points of uniqueness, and these natural advantages are then upgraded beyond their true worth. The sense of task or mission is at the same time downgraded and the result of this inward whirlpool is the self-contained provincial man or society. John Updike mercilessly portrays this inward confinement of racism in his portrayal of the "couples" at Tarbox. They are all finally identical to each other; it was the way they wanted it too; and in the end they fall to pieces at least in part from the sheer boredom and triviality that such inward intensity always produces. No people or race are so interesting and self complete that they can stay alive and creative if their only diet is the soul food of their own unique creation. Uniqueness of itself always produces a special form of malnutrition.

(2) Racism also causes hostility toward the foreigner, the outsider. It is a simple matter to feel superior toward the outsider because the dice are loaded in our favor; the criteria of worthiness that we employ is made up of qualities and characteristics that we see in ourselves and how can anyone from another province or cultural background possibly measure up! We the racist have an unbeatable headstart in the uniqueness factor and all that the stranger can do is to somehow break in by means of mimicry. I think one very valuable result of living outside of your own country and community is the healthy challenge and pressure that an international living situation puts upon the very uniqueness specialization that racism is founded upon.

In the face of this common tendency in us all toward racism we must reassess the foundation of our identity. Where do we gain the awareness of particular unique worth? How can we have that particularness without being at the same moment racist?

The history of the Old Testament traces for us three sources of our identity. It is crucial that we place these three into their correct focus:

(1) The first source is the uniqueness we have because of creation. The way God has made me, the way he has chosen me to look and be is the first source of identity. Nowhere does the Bible reject the uniqueness fact about man. In fact when this valid source of individual worth is suppressed the result is damaging. James Farmer has this to say in a recent article on the feelings of the American Negro.

"There is an issue, however, and it is frighteningly real. The question stripped bare is this: What is the way for black Americans to find a meaning for their existence and to achieve dignity in the American context? Is it through assimilation? Or is it through racial cohesiveness?.....

".... What has been said to the black man throughout this century, by his leaders and by white liberals, is that he must think of himself as an individual and not as a member of a group, and that if, as an individual, he gained education and money he would first be acculturated and then assimilated into a racially integrated society.

He would become, in reality, a white man with an invisible black skin in a color-blind community. Men of good will, black and white, bowed to the myth that proximity would, in itself, produce color-blindness. If assimilation were achieved, the black man would have no ethnic or racial identity; he would be an American distributed through every phase of the nation's life. The black ghetto would disappear; the Harlems would become nightmares of the past....

".... Efforts to implement this dispersion concept of integration obviously have failed, though some still argue for it -- naively, I think. It no longer enjoys the widespread acceptance in the black community which it once had. Indeed, it is today under fierce attack. What the dispersion concept required of the black man was a kind of abnegation, a losing of himself as an American.

Its opponents argue for an ethnic cohesiveness, a finding of himself as a black man, as the urgent goal. They advocate group self-assertion. They foster pride in pigmentation, rather than white mimicry. Rather than disperse the ghetto and reject self, they would preserve, cherish, and develop the ghetto, and love the black self."

-DIALOGUE - Vol. 2 1969 No. 2  
pp. 94-96

This form and basis of individual and social worth is important but not enough of itself.

(2) The second source of identity is rooted in achievement. Achievement grants and proves something about me that is invaluable. This is the identity we see in David, that towering hero of Israel. He is everything; he is military genius, poet, musician, political leader par excellence; he is courageous, lusty, honest. David carves out an identity for himself and for his people that is the dramatic marvel of the Old Testament. Every man wants this kind of identity. It is the high school football star who brings a name to himself and his school. It is the rags to riches success story. But, achievement is not enough when it is all that a man has to give him inner worth. In fact this source of identity when alone sets a man up for the terrible fall when he feels rightly or wrongly that he is no longer achieving, and it makes both a man and society obsessively conscious of the symbols of greatness.

(3) The third source of identity is the most important because it is deeper and it is free of the racist dangers of the first two. It is the sense of worth a man receives in the forgiveness of his sins. It is the identity of baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is identity that is given to me because God loves me. It is the identity support a man gets at the end of a long day at work when his children jump up on him and really love him just for what he is. The wife who loves her partner, knowing very well all of his weaknesses, yet loving him still. This is the identity Abraham received on Mt. Moriah; Moses received it too in the law; David discovered this source of selfhood when Nathan condemned him as a man who had sinned before God.

Unlike the identity of creation and of achievement, this third source binds me toward my neighbor in a profound solidarity than we have yet to hear in the slogans of our generation. It refuses to cancel out my uniqueness or my concreteness but I have these worthwhile ingredients without paying the cheap price of superiority and hostility toward other men who are different than I am.

Here is authentic identity. This is that "something there is that doesn't love a wall."