

ORDINARY SUNDAY IV "C"
FEBRUARY 3/4, 2019

The last months have witnessed a national debate regarding a border wall on our country's southern border with Mexico. While not addressing a physical structure, Jesus confronts the issue of a wall on two levels in today's Gospel. In doing so he calls all of us to reflect on what kind of wall we may live behind and what kind of wall we erect to keep others separate from us.

Coming to his hometown of Nazareth Jesus entered into the insulating atmosphere of family and community. Like small towns today, Nazareth was Jesus' "home" in the sense of the American poet Robert Frost's words "that place where they have to take you in." A small town, (or a particular neighborhood or subdivision in a larger city) can be like a wall—for all its familiarity, the closeness of its people, it can smother creativity behind a strong wall-like ethos of conformity: "We always do it this way. We all belong to this church. We all vote this way." No doubt word of Jesus had gotten around from neighboring towns. The people of Nazareth were proud of their "local boy" and, by extension, basked in his notoriety. They had heard what he had done in Capernaum and were convinced he was some sort of prophet from God about to shower them especially with God's favor. And then Jesus confronts their walled-in mind-set and existence.

Jesus announces divine blessing going not just to those in his hometown, but also to gentiles, pagans, non-believers, people who didn't follow the strict Jewish moral and religious codes of conduct. To drive home his point he uses stories of the Prophets Elijah and Elisha where God healed and included people that were not part of the usual fold. Jesus proclaims that God's liberation and salvation are more inclusive and abundant than the exclusive, narrow understanding of the covenant that the people in his hometown synagogue believed God had with them. Suddenly, everything changes.

It is interesting how the mind can turn quickly when we do not agree with someone. We may feel that a pope, bishop, priest, political leader, teacher or friend is wonderful until they say or do something that isn't exactly what we believe or "the way we've always done it." Then we

are shocked and angry. After all, it is more comfortable and safe to congregate with like-minded people because it feels good to be part of a group that we understand and that we think understands us as well. When someone who we feel belongs to us, even Jesus, says something to the contrary or challenges our traditional established way of thinking or our current status, we are often quick to turn on him or her. It is one thing for an outsider to say or do something divergent, but a whole other game when it is one of our own.

With the unheard of inclusiveness of Jesus' message challenging their interior and exterior emotional, cultural, and spiritual walls Jesus' fellow townspeople had erected around themselves, their initial joy turned quickly to anger. They became blinded by indignation and did not want to believe that God's grace is not subject to a parochial list of who is in and who is out in terms of membership in the Kingdom of God, of God's covenant of love.

How do I, how do we as a church, a parish react to Jesus' message? Am I, are we, so focused on what I/we believe God's blessing should look like—just for me/us—that I/we miss the opportunity of grace Jesus is bearing in our midst today as he did that day in Nazareth? The gospel says Jesus' hometown family and friends “were filled with rage” and “drove him out of town to the brow of the hill on which it was built intending to hurl him over and kill him” (Lk. 4:28,29). How dare Jesus tell them who should be included? How dare Jesus tell us?

St. Paul's famous “Hymn to Love” in today's second reading challenges us to bring down the walls of our lives. St. Paul was addressing a church, much like the Church we live in today, facing all kinds of factions in which spiritual and personal walls of animosity had been erected between people. St. Paul's exhortation on the qualities that mark true love for God lived in love of neighbor, whomever and wherever that neighbor, whomever the neighbor may be, echoes the challenge, again of the poet Robert Frost in his famous poem “Building Walls”: “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 like a wall, That wants it down.”