

BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS - Genesis 33:1-11; Ephesians 2:14-22
Salisbury Congregational Church, Salisbury, Ct. July 3, 2016

*For Christ is our peace....(who) has broken down the dividing wall, that is,
the hostility between us.*

Ephesians 2:14

Most of my sermons focus on biblical characters, but on this national holiday weekend, my illustrations will center on two secular saints—two icons of the creation of the American nation—John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. I'm using "saint" here in the biblical sense, which does not imply some elevated sense of piety or perfection, but rather the capacity to be set apart and used by God. One of the Sunday school teachers in a church I served, told of trying to explain biblical "saints" to her fifth graders, one of whom innocently gave a great definition. Referring to the stained glass depictions of Abraham and Moses and Paul he said, "Are those the guys through whom the light shines upstairs in the church sanctuary?" Saint are those through whom God's light shines, sometimes in spite of ourselves. Paul calls all followers "saints" set apart in some measure as we allow Christ to work through us, warts though we may have.

Adams and Jefferson may seem like unlikely saints, even with this definition. Neither was particularly orthodox by the standards of their day. Both were children of the Enlightenment. Adams, although a regular churchgoer yearned for a more rational approach to faith and rebelled against the dogmatic and authoritarian Calvinism of his day. Although he believed that a strong religious fabric was an essential foundation for a democratic society, he struggled with much of the commonly held views on the person and work of Jesus. Temperamentally, Adams was often argumentative and acerbic and his colleagues had a tough time seeing in him much evidence of the fruit of the spirit. Jesus like he was not! Jefferson, probably the most ardent student of theology among the founding fathers, had even more difficulty with the Bible, and especially stories of healing and miracles and resurrection. While outwardly Anglican, he was often accused of being an "infidel," by his opponents, but he labored for years cutting and snipping to create his own version of the Bible, a third of the length. He kept the moral teachings, but eliminated most of the supernatural elements. Incidentally, this was a private efforts, never published in his lifetime. Only recently did the Smithsonian do a major exhibit of his original cuttings and pastings.

As is well known, their remarkable collaboration during the Revolutionary period was crucial to the birth of the new nation. They became particularly close during the years they spent in Paris following the war working on the peace treaty. Jefferson's wife had just died, as had two of his children, and the Adams, especially Abigail, took the younger Jefferson under their wing and provided a haven of warmth and healing. Soon though, they were off to separate responsibilities, Adams as ambassador to England and Jefferson to France. Then in the early years of the Republic they had a serious falling apart. By the time they faced each other in the elections of 1796 and 1800, their anger and mistrust of one another was palpable. Like Jacob and Esau they were deeply suspicious of each other. Jefferson thought Adams had betrayed the revolutionary spirit, and was secretly a monarchist, and pro-English. He mocked Adams, calling him "his rotundancy" (apparently a man of ample girth), labeling him a pretentious man, a "poisonous weed," with a warmongering spirit, who was centralizing power and undermining the

states. In return Adams saw Jefferson as pro-French, a romantic who was totally taken in by the French Revolution and naïve about its dangers and excesses. He believed Jefferson was secretly undermining his diplomatic initiatives, and saw him as an incredible hypocrite, creating a public persona as a democrat, a man of the people, while living a lavish lifestyle made possible by his ongoing acceptance of slavery.

If we think the election cycle of 2016 has been a low point, we need only look to those earlier elections for equally brutal infighting. Adams and Jefferson stayed behind the scenes, working through party newspapers and broadsides. But the name calling and accusation hurdling through the media was appalling. Adams was an open book, but Jefferson, always tried to create an air of mystery, as if he were above the fray, which has led one historian, Joseph Ellis, to call him “the American sphinx.” Yet it became clear later that he had encouraged and funded the most scurrilous attacks on his opponent.

After Jefferson defeated Adams in 1800, the President invited him to tea, but there was too much history to easily reconcile. Adams was angered that Jefferson said nothing about the recent death of Adams’ son Charles. Jefferson was infuriated by Adams’ decision to appoint a whole host of judges after the election and then Adams added insult to injury by choosing to leave the capital rather than attend the inauguration. Any of this sound familiar?

For the next 11 years, these two accomplished, brilliant men did not speak. Like Jacob and Esau, there was deep hurt and no desire to make amends for many years. But like Jacob and Esau as well—and this is the remarkable thing-- their feud came to an end. This is fundamentally the story of a reconciliation, of healing, of the power of grace. The good news here is that hostility and hatred does not have to be the last word, but that reconciliation is possible.

The reason for our hope, of course, is the reconciling work of Jesus. Ephesians talks of the deep division and hostility that existed between Jew and Gentile. But then it goes on to eloquently proclaim, now “you who were once far off have been brought near....Jesus is our peace, who has made both groups one and broken down the dividing wall of hostility.” (Eph 2) This kind of breaking down of barriers always seems so fanciful, so unrealistic, so pie in the sky, doesn’t it, in our world of division making? So when we see it occur, as rare as it might seem, it is almost always unexpected, a sign of grace. It is grace, that gives us hope that what is does not always have to be. Robert Frost famously said, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” offering the truth, that the goal for those who would follow Jesus is to break down the barriers that we so easier build up.

Philadelphia physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence Benjamin Rush was the catalyst for the reconciliation. He continued to correspond with each, urging them “as the north and south poles of the American revolution,” to reconcile, and thus to gain the “acclaim of posterity.” For some years nothing happened. Reconciliations aren’t easy when the hurts are real. When Rush reported an offhand comment of Adams, ‘I always loved Jefferson and love him still,’ that was enough for the sage of Monticello. He indicated he would welcome a communication from his once staunch adversary. Thus began a correspondence of some 150 letters which continued until they both died on July 4, 1826—50 years to the day of the signing of the Declaration. Adams suggested they write not “psalms or sermons” but as if they met a

brother sailor after 25 years absence, with a breezy ‘how ye be, Jack?’” The letters ranged widely—“great causes past, common memories, books, politics, education, religion, the French, the British, their families, their health, slavery—and always repeatedly, the American Revolution.” (McCullough, p. 605) Adams pleaded, “We ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other.” Jefferson refused to be drawn into old conflicts—perhaps that was a mark of age and a relief that they were no longer in the fray. But he offered an appealing perspective, “We will continue to have differences on issues through all future times.” Everyone will take his side, but “opinions which are equally honest on both sides, should not affect personal esteem or social intercourse.” They were able to see old issues in new light. When Jefferson during the War of 1812 was able to praise Adams for his decision to build up the navy in 1798, which he once had opposed as warmongering, it was a sign that they were able to see the merits of the other side.

I find this whole account remarkable, the reconciliation of two former allies become enemies, become friends again. Well worth reading. Two icons of the Revolution--so gifted, but so human; giants, yet with feet of clay, who are able to move behind division to find unity and healing and wholeness.

Is it possible that this story of reconciliation is evidence of God’s light shining through these imperfect saints, that their experience offers us a word of grace so necessary in a world where we—especially in election season--so easily divide up into camps of like-minded people, and then don’t merely disagree with others, but tend to demonize and thus dismiss them?

It is always a challenge for Christians to behave differently, to model another approach to human dynamics.

It has been remarkable to watch the adulation offered to Pope Francis I. Cultural icons like former Daily Show host Jon Stewart declared “I love this man” Chris Rock announced “Pope Francis might be the greatest man alive.” What has he done to gain such praise---refuse to be drawn into dead end debates on human sexuality, wash the feet of the poor on Maundy Thursday, being sure to include Muslims, ignore the fancier trappings of his office, speak about the injustice of the gap between the rich and the poor, reach out to those to those who have drifted from the church, even to atheists, take steps to admit past wrongdoing of the church, call for greater accountability in the financial dealings of the Vatican, suggest the care of the environment and responsibility for global warming is on the table. What has he done which has garnered such interest and adoration—he has simply acted like a Christian, don’t you think? So refreshing—and still so powerful. Building bridges instead of walls.

That’s our challenge. Not just confessing our faith, but acting it when it is not easy, when we think our ego or our identity is at stake.

When I was in college, we’d occasionally go to a popular hangout for students called the Ivy Room—Fried chicken, Cole slaw, hush puppies, and 3.2% beer were its mainstays—this was south, remember—I went to Duke. When you paid your bill at the register, the owner would always hand you a little card –credit card size—on which were printed the words, “people are lonely and unhappy because they build walls instead of bridges.” I suppose it was his way of doing a little bit of subtle evangelizing. I carried one of those cards around in my wallet for more

than twenty years—until it disintegrated. It's funny what you remember from those days, which now seem long ago, but that little motto stuck with me and I have tried to live by its words. Seek reconciliation, learn to forgive, build bridges instead of walls. It's the gospel way, isn't it?

THANKS BE TO GOD WHO GIVES US THE VICTORY THROUGH JESUS CHRIST