Sunday, June 13, 2004
EXTRAVAGANT LOVE
Luke 7:36-39

One of my favorite sayings is: never tear down a fence unless you know why it was built — never build a fence that is not needed or one that causes harm. These sentiments are found in a poem by Robert Frost, Mending Wall. Its opening line is, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” In the poem, Frost describes a wall that he and his neighbor repair each year. Frost wonders why this particular wall is necessary. However, his neighbor keeps saying, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Then Frost asks, “Why do they make good neighbors?” Where there are cows, a wall or a fence could be important. But he and his neighbor have no cows. Frost then advises, “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.” These are good questions.

Fences and walls come in many varieties. They can be physical structures, or they can be ideas, superstitions, laws, or beliefs.

Some fences are helpful and serve a useful purpose. You can build a fence around your property to protect it. You can also build a fence around a belief to protect it. The fence is important for you because you are afraid that if that belief were called into question, you would lose some of your security. For example, if you want to continue to believe that the earth is the center of the universe, that’s okay, but don’t demand or pass a law that I have to believe it, and if I don’t believe as you do, God will send me to eternal punishment. Those kinds of fences are okay if they do not cause harm to others or to yourself.

There are fences that are harmful and need to be torn down. One of President Reagan’s most powerful statements was to Gorbachev when he said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” He was talking about the wall that the Soviet Union built to separate East and West, and it divided people for too many years. It needed to come down, and it did.

There are still many fences and walls that need to come down. For thousands of years, many human beings believed that women were by nature inferior to men. Therefore, men were supposed to be in charge, and women were to be subordinate. That fence is still in existence in many places and needs to be torn down.

Years ago, a strong fence was built to justify slavery. That fence claimed that people with dark skin were inferior and were supposed to be slaves. After that fence was torn down when slavery was outlawed, another fence was built to support segregation. People of different skin colors should not be allowed to eat together, go to school together, live in the same neighborhood, or marry each other. That fence continues to exist in too many forms.

Many of the “religious purity laws” in the Bible were fences that Jesus called into question and then helped tear down. Jews and Samaritans were not supposed to interact with each other. Jesus tore down that fence. Religious people were not supposed to eat with sinners or outcasts. Sinners and outcasts were defined as people whose beliefs were different from yours, or who had occupations that were considered unclean. He tore down that fence. You were not supposed to heal a person on the Sabbath. He tore down that fence. The Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament is filled with “purity laws” that Jesus took down.

The story from the Gospel of Luke, which was read before this sermon began, is about fences being taken down. It's a story of extravagant love, the kind of love which frequently tears down fences. It's a story about a woman anointing Jesus. This story, with some differences, is found in all four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

According to the story in Matthew and Mark, the anointing of Jesus by a woman takes place in the home of Simon the leper, and the name of the woman is not mentioned. It is the head of Jesus that is anointed, not his feet. The fact that Jesus would even be in the home of a leper is an example of a fence being taken down.

In John's story and in Luke's account, the woman anoints the feet of Jesus. Luke goes even further. He describes the incident as taking place in the home of a Pharisee and makes a point of telling you that the unnamed woman who pours the expensive ointment on the feet of Jesus and then wipes his feet with her hair is a sinner.

It's also instructive to note that in Luke's account, the anointing of Jesus is not the main point of the story as it is in the other three Gospels. In Luke's version, the emphasis is on the extravagance of the woman's act and on the complete and unconditional acceptance by Jesus of her act of devotion and of her as a human being.

Note especially the audacity of this woman. Having heard that Jesus was a dinner guest at the home of a Pharisee, she took her jar of very expensive ointment and entered this home as an uninvited guest. That in itself was a big fence to cross. Luke implies that it was common knowledge that this same woman had the reputation of being a sinner. What sins she might have committed, no one knows. I admire this woman. She practiced extravagant love. What an example she is for you and for me.

The fences that had been built to keep her away from Jesus did not stop her. Luke reports that when the Pharisee who was hosting the dinner for Jesus saw what this woman was doing, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him — that she is a sinner."

What this Pharisee didn't know was that Jesus probably knew the reputation of this woman, and he would have never thought of keeping her away or not allowing her to touch him, no matter what kind of sinner she was. His extravagant love and acceptance of her was as powerful as her extravagant love for him. She crossed a fence that had been built and needed to be taken down, and Jesus crossed the fence in accepting her.

What a contrast this story is to the kinds of fences people build today and refuse to abandon. Perhaps you remember an incident a few years ago in Texas when three white men tied a disabled African-American man to the back of their pickup truck and dragged him to his death for the "fun of it." How could anyone find "fun" in this tragedy? But here we are in the 21st century, and hate crimes still take place because of fences that refuse to be taken down.

It takes extravagant love to demolish harmful fences that separate people. Both the woman and Jesus acted with this kind of love in this story from Luke's Gospel.

Because Jesus never let fences keep him from doing what's right, he sensed in this woman a spirit that was not afraid to give all she had. He also knew how to receive her loving act. He didn't say, "You shouldn't have done that. It's too extravagant and wasteful." He didn't say, "Because you're a woman, the rule is that you aren't to touch me in any way."

Her generous spirit, in addition to her courage, deeply moved him. He especially appreciated the lavishness and spontaneity of her action. It was not smothered by caution and prudence. She did not pour out a few drops on his feet and think to herself, “This is very expensive ointment, so I need to be careful and not waste any.”

It wasn’t a very practical thing to do. The host at the dinner party didn’t say that, but he was probably thinking it. In some of the other Gospel stories of this event, there were those present who criticized the woman for her extravagance.

That’s another theme in this story. I don’t know about you, but I get tired of trying to be practical all the time. Sometimes I want to do things that are extravagantly impractical. Some of the most beautiful gifts and experiences in this life are not very practical, and God is all for them. Not everything you do in life needs to be connected to a specific priority, goal, or objective that can be measured.

Earlier in the ministry of Jesus, the disciples wanted to keep the little children away from Jesus. They thought that spending time with children was a waste of time and energy. Why should he spend his precious time with children who wouldn’t understand what his ministry was about anyway? There were more practical and important issues on their schedule. They tried to build a fence around Jesus to keep the children away, but he wouldn’t allow it.

Extravagant love is never very practical. Much of what you do in your life is marvelously impractical, and it has been so since the beginning of the human race when crude pictures were drawn on the walls of caves. Because you are created in the image of God, you have the desire to create and to be nourished by beauty, much of which has nothing to do with being practical.

A rose garden or flower garden of any kind has no practical value, but if you love gardening, you are extravagant in your loving care of that garden. Human beings spend a lot of time planting flowers around homes and parks. The flowers don’t have any practical value. They don’t feed the hungry or clothe the homeless. Parks in the middle of cities have no practical value. They are marvelously impractical.

Dancing for the sheer joy of dancing, pretty clothes, ribbons and bows, a new spring hat, a colorful necktie — all are wonderfully impractical. You could just as well wear simple clothes with no color, decoration, or tailoring. They would keep your body covered and warm in the winter.

Going to a circus or zoo, flying a kite, taking a bicycle ride, playing a round of golf, or having a nice dinner with your friends — all are extravagantly impractical and filled with love. A beautifully furnished home or apartment has no practical value. Why spend all that money on attractive furniture and matching drapes and bedspreads? Plain pull-down shades would do.

Flowers and candles are magnificently impractical, as are the songs of birds. Hymns and chants and symphonies are as non-utilitarian as a lover’s kiss. Prayers and litanies are only words, cheap as children’s smiles. Would you want to live in a world where every item or action had to pass the test of utility and practicality?

Would you want to live in a world where everyone is always building fences to keep you out, especially if you were considered by someone to be a sinner? Would you want to live a life where extravagant love was always criticized?

What this story of the woman anointing the feet of Jesus with expensive ointment is telling you and me is that love for one another and God's love for you is not measured out in little drops, a little here and a little there, but is poured out freely and abundantly.

Some people always hold back. They measure out their love and their giving with a medicine dropper, frightened lest they use more than necessary. They are afraid they might become too generous, too extravagant in their love. Other people are always comparing their generosity with others. They want to be as giving as others, but not more.

Today, there are too many fences in this life that need to be taken down. Too much in life is based on hatred, fear, self-protection, and judgment. Too many fences are built out of fear.

Fortunately, there are others like the woman in this story. They live their lives on the principle of abundance, not scarcity. They are open, giving, and extravagant with their love, patience, and forgiveness. This kind of extravagant love ignores walls and fences.

This is a story that tells you to learn to love with extravagance. Do not be afraid to show affection, to be caring and compassionate. Learn the joy of acceptance. Do not be afraid to call into question some of your fences. Thank God for those many gifts and experiences in life which are wonderfully impractical. Amen.