

“Fences and Neighbours”

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Good fences make good neighbours. If you’ve spent a lot of your life living in a majority English-speaking country, you’ve probably heard that expression. If you had grown up speaking Welsh in the 19th century, you might have heard a proverb which has been translated as “Love thy neighbour, but pull not down thy hedge.” The Russians put it a little more succinctly: Love your neighbour, but put up a fence.” You know, just in case.

There is always some sense of the limits to hospitality. In some cultures, particularly ones that are traditionally nomadic, with small numbers of people spread across vast distances, radical hospitality is an expectation, to the point that a host is socially obliged to give up their bed to a stranger who arrives with nowhere to sleep, and to give the best of their food to any guest, even if their own food supplies are limited. But in this context it is up to the guest to respect the pressure this puts on the host, and to leave voluntarily before it causes undue hardship. Neighbourliness takes on a different character when your neighbours are so far apart.

In our context, of millions of people living in close proximity, the boundaries between neighbours are negotiated in different ways. When I lived in Montreal, one of my favourite places to work and study was the Westmount library. It was a beautiful old building on the edge of a park, near the Unitarian church, and also had one of the best selections of English-language books, since it was in a primarily English speaking area. It also happened to be one of the most wealthy areas of the city, and one of the municipalities that had chosen to subsequently de-amalgamate from the city of Montreal, a few years after all the municipalities on the island had previously been merged into one city. One of the consequences of this was that, although it was a public library, it was public only to the city of Westmount, was not part of the Montreal library system, and only allowed people living within the boundaries of Westmount to take out books. Those living in other boroughs could use the library space, but would have to pay to get a borrowing card – I believe it was about \$200 a year. When I expressed shock to the librarian who told me of this policy, she told me that

that was how much Westmount residents paid in taxes for the library each year.

My dismay was especially acute when I lived on the street – Cote-des Neiges Road – that formally divided Westmount from the city of Montreal as a whole. The dividing line ran down the middle of the road – if I had lived on the other side of the same street I would have been eligible for a Westmount library card, but alas, that was as close as I would ever get. I have never quite gotten over the feeling that this was absurd and unfair and elitist, though I know that city politics are a complicated affair with a long history, with more things at stake than me wanting a library card. And when I'm tempted to feel morally superior to residents of a wealthy neighbourhood drawing lines in the middle of streets to keep the money in and the riffraff out, I ask myself what would I think if it were announced that Canada was being suddenly amalgamated with a country that has many more people and much less financial wealth – let's say Bangladesh, which has about 5 times the number of people, and one-tenth the money – and that government expenditures per person were going to be averaged out accordingly. Whatever I may profess to believe would be seriously challenged. I would probably have to get off my high horse pretty fast, and admit that I'm not any better than those dastardly people in Westmount. Even those of us who feel deeply about justice and equality and sharing freely, usually like to have some control over how the sharing happens, and when, and with whom. As someone said to me recently: "I'm all in favour of common sense, especially when it's practiced by other people."

Consider the reading we heard earlier from Steven Shick, about the man who showed up at the church door during a board meeting, and was politely but decisively ushered out. Shick said that the more he thought about the way they had handled it, the more it bothered him. What he and his fellow church-members did was well within the bounds of normal, and potentially much more compassionate than they could have acted. After all, they could have told him to get lost, or simply ignored the knock at the door altogether. Instead, he says, "not only had we politely dismissed the man, but had handed him a list of places we had carefully prepared...[but] while we had practiced a small act of kindness, we failed to open our hearts to the stranger."

Make no mistake: opening our hearts to the stranger will mess with our plans. It will get in the way of us accomplishing what we think we are supposed to accomplish. If Shick and his fellow church members had taken the time to really welcome the man who knocked at their door, there is a very good chance that it would have taken up the rest of their board

meeting. Whatever else they had on their agenda that night may have been left undone. Shick says, “The problem that evening was not that the door was unlocked, but that our hearts remained closed. Institutions, even those dedicated to helping others, often separate and divide us from one another. They absolve us from practicing bold acts of hospitality that can save us from the numbing effects of radical disconnection.”

In some ways I would love to pound the pulpit and give a rousing sermon about the virtues of radical hospitality, but we all need to be careful of the virtues that we preach, when our corresponding practice of them is less-than-perfect. The moments when I do practice radical hospitality and step out from the safe and normal are truly transformative and have opened me up to new ideas of what is possible. But at the same time, they are only transformative because they contrast with the ordinary way of living and relating to other people. Radical hospitality is not hospitality if the guest already lives with you. Then they’re not a neighbour, but a roommate, and roommates can be really annoying. At the risk of going overboard on clichés, I think of the saying “it’s the silence between the notes that makes the music.” You could say that it’s the fences between us that make us neighbours, or that show us who our neighbours are.

Wolfgang Mieder is a scholar of folklore, and has written a fascinating study on the origins of this expression, and its role in public discourse. He says “proverbs are used to free complex situations from ambiguity.” They’re often used to put an end to a conversation, by making a simple statement that everyone is supposed to agree with. But then as Niels Bohr said: “There are small truths and there are great truths. The opposite of a small truth is clearly false, but the opposite of a great truth is another great truth.”

The story that Peter told is not necessarily a simple morality tale about why bridges are better than fences. The bridge can only be built once there is a ditch dividing the land. The beauty of the gesture is only made possible by the recognition that something has happened to disrupt the feeling of harmony.

So even though a proverb can be a conversation-stopper, by making a statement that is deceptively simple, it may be better to see a phrase like “good fences make good neighbours” as a conversation-starter instead.

After years of tedious research through newspapers, archives, and almanacs to trace the history of the saying, Wolfgang Mieder was reluctant to conclude very much, other than that the topic is more complicated than

it seems at first glance. The main conclusion he did reach was not a vision of universal harmony, but rather this: “people will most likely never be able to live without some fences, but they should at least build them together and in agreement on both sides...The construction needs to be a united effort...[and] there also needs to be a mending of the fences by both parties with opportunities for communication and bridge-building.” So if I had to make a prayer about good fences and good neighbours, it would go something like this: May our hearts be open to our neighbours – to those who seem strange to us, and are unlike us in ways. May we uphold the uniqueness and the relatedness of each person, of each people, of each path and each place. May the fences be built in mutual goodwill and respect for our differences, and may there be many gates and bridges for the traveller, for the refugee, for the curious, and for those seeking a home. May there be productive board meetings, and may there be interrupted board meetings, which remind us of why we are meeting in the first place. May there be library cards for all...and may we have the patience to put up with small inconveniences. May each of us come to understand something of the experience of others, and may we have the courage to let that knowledge into our hearts, and let it change us. Amen.