Fourth Sunday of the Year, cycle C

Paul tells us “love is patient, love is kind”

And then we read today’s gospel

In which it appears, at least to some commentators,

That Jesus actually picks a fight

Continuation of last Sunday’s gospel

Jesus unrolls the scroll of Isaiah

Readings the passage about the spirit of God upon him

To proclaim good news to the poor

And to announce a year acceptable to the Lord

To announce a Jubilee

And the crowd speaks highly of him

Amazed at his gracious words

But then things change

Change so quickly

That some commentators think

Luke is giving us condensed version

Of something that actually developed

Over several visits to the Nazarean synagogue

Whatever the chronology

Luke seems to present Jesus as the instigator here

Putting imagined words in his neighbors mouths

If Luke wanted us to feel the issue here,

wouldn't it have made more sense

to let the underlying pride or selfishness of Nazareth

be seen in the crowd’s own words

then answered by Jesus’ better words & nobler vision?

But the story doesn’t go that Way

And instead Jesus appears as an instigator of the conflict

He describes himself as the prophet

his listeners as the sorry compatriots who fail to heed.

He lectures them from the familiar stories of scripture,

implying that they are fools

as well as presumptuous in their expectation

that he should bless them as he has blessed strangers.

Not surprisingly, his words make them angry.

They become like the killers of the prophets of old.

They come close to casting him off the cliff.

He has successfully provoked them to be what he called them

interesting turn of phrase caught my attention this last week

commentator spoke of “the home court disadvantage”

ordinarily we think of the home court

the home pulpit

the home stage as an asset and advantage

but not always so

like a current governor of New Jersey

who does better in the poling in a neighboring state

than his own

where he recently scored only a 33% approval rating

home court disadvantage

an interesting way to think about this Jesus homecoming

a home coming because he has been away a bit

now a mature adult and rabbi

he has seen a bigger world

and knows things larger, grander, more urgent

than small-town thinking

not only of his neighbors

but also of his extended family

for he was probably related to many of those

who filled that Nazarean synagogue

He knows too well the smallness of his own people,

He had grown up with their narrowness.

Maybe he remembered the way they gossiped about his mother

And smirked at the idea of some virgin birth

or had seen how traveling Samaritans were unwelcome

how the tax-collectors were despised.

But he had walked away.

And that’s the thing about the spirit of God

It just won’t let you rest at home.

Once you get it, you become marginalized like him

overcome by a similar inclusivity, compassion, and humility

you don’t fit in the same old crowds anymore

Going home is a nightmare just like Nazareth was for him.

And what is it that separates his extended family

From this transformed prophet?

So much so that in another gospel passage

He can claim as his mother and brothers

Only those who do his Father’s will

What separates them is his proclaiming a year of jubilee

For every outcast, Samaritan,

tax collector and suspected adulteress

but they are resistant to any jubilee

that does not put them at the center

and protect their religious privilege

what separates them is that Jesus

will not put a wall between himself

and those on the margins of society

the kind of wall his kin erected

between the tight nit community of Nazareth

and outsiders

that had now become a wall

between them and him

While reading this passage,

Reminded of Robert Frost’s poem *Mending Wall*

in particular, it’s most famous line:

*Good walls make good neighbors*

While that line is perhaps

Best remembered from that poem

easy to forget that the whole of Frost’s poem

is written to challenge that assertion.

Two farmers are out for their spring ritual

replacing stones that have fallen from the wall separating their two properties.

the voice of the poet, keeps wondering

why they need walls at all;

he writes*: He is all pine and I am apple orchard*

*“My apple trees will never get across*

*/ And eat the cones under his pines,” I tell him.*

To which his neighbor responds with the signature line.

*Good walls make good neighbors*

But the poet isn’t persuaded,

So he writes

*I wonder /*

*If I could put a notion in his head:*

*/ ‘Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it / Where there are cows?*

*/ But here there are no cows.’*

then the poet continues,

naming a truth that runs before the poet

all the way back to Jesus day

and from his to our own heated debates

about walls and borders and exclusion

and what lives matter

Frost writes:

*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. /*

He concludes

*Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, /*

*That wants it down*.

Jesus is likely to side with the poet on this one

Actually it’s his dislike of walls

that gets him in so much trouble

not only during this first sermon

but in such an astounding myriad of other ways

that it eventually leads to his public execution

Inhabitants of Nazareth seem to agree with the farmers

That good walls make good neighbors

Walls keep us safe

Mark the boundaries between us and them

Keep the wolves from the sheep

And fear-inducing refugees from our shores

Isn’t it ironic that one of the central promises

From some political candidates

Is to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico?

But Jesus disagrees.

For if one truly lives into our identity

As one of God’s beloved Children

And not just call ourselves Christian

But live into that identity

Then there’s no more need for walls

to keep the enemies out

because there are no more enemies.

The reign of God, as proclaimed by Jesus

Is a realm of only open doors

No walls

Paul knew something about a community’s penchant

For barrier construction

He crafted the soaring hymn to love we hear today

Because the Corinthians were divided

But by teaching that love

*Bears all things*

*Believes al things*

*Hopes all things*

*Endures all things*

He announces that true love in Christ

erases every status

Deconstructs every wall

How do we do that?

What is the antidote to barrier building?

Pope Francis thinks it is the practice of mercy

In preparation for the "Year of Mercy"

our very own jubilee year that began December 8

and continues throughout this coming year

last April Pope Francis issued a formal statement

outlining the reasons and hopes for this year

The first line says it all:

*Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy*

In midst of document reflects on same gospel, writing:

*This Holy Year (of Mercy) will bring to the fore the richness of Jesus' mission echoed in the words of the prophet: to bring a word and gesture of consolation to the poor, to proclaim liberty to those bound by new forms of slavery in modern society, to restore sight to those who can see no more because are caught up in themselves, to restore dignity to all those from whom it has robbed. The preaching of Jesus is made visible once more in the response of faith which Christians are called to offer by their witness.*

And how do we make the preaching of Jesus visible?

How do we learn to be witnesses of this God without walls

This divinity beyond borders ...

We do it by practicing mercy

Sometimes defined as showing compassion

To someone who has not earned it

Classically illustrated by the story of the emperor Napoleon

Once approached by a mother seeking pardon for her son

The emperor replied that the young man had twice

committed a certain offense

and justice demanded death.

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained.

"I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy

if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."

"Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy."

And he spared the boy’s life

Seven years ago this month

The U.S. inaugurated its first African-American President

The day after that inauguration

On Obama’s first full day in office

The national celebrated a national day of prayer

At the service conducted that day

At the Washington National Cathedral

Preacher Sharon Watkins narrated a story

Attributed to Cherokee Wisdom:

**\*KEYBOARD**

*One evening a grandfather was teaching his young grandson about the internal battle that each person faces. “There are two wolves struggling inside each of us,” the old man said. “One wolf is vengefulness, anger, resentment, self-pity, fear . . . “The other wolf is compassion, faithfulness, hope, truth, love . . . ” The grandson sat, thinking, then asked: “Which wolf wins, Grandfather? ” His grandfather replied, “The one you feed.”*

We come to this place

This spiritual banquet hall

To be fed by Word and Sacrament

To feed the mercy wolf ... or better

In the image of our Christ

To feed the mercy lamb

So that compassion will be ours,

Especially when we do not deserve it

and through us, God’s mercy will rain down upon all

who also do not deserve it

but who desperately need it

through Christ our Lord.

\*Rory Cooney, “Your Mercy like Rain”