Build bridges, not walls

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

In a tale told by Oscar Wilde, a giant was distressed by the fact that a group of children had taken to playing in his garden. A large and flowery place, carpeted with plush green grass, the garden was made even more beautiful and alive by the songs and dancing of the happy young ones who gathered there. But the giant did not appreciate their presence. He built a high wall around his garden and put up a sign that read: 'Trespassers will be prosecuted.'

As time passed, and as the seasons changed all around it, the giant's garden remained in winter. Birds did not care to sing; the trees forgot to blossom. Only the north wind came to roar about the garden, as hail rattled the trellises and covered the ground with icy pellets. All that the wall accomplished was to keep out every source of joy and assure the giant of his solitary sadness.

To learn the surprising and moving end of the story, look for 'The Selfish Giant' by Oscar Wilde. This brief introduction sets a good backdrop against which to consider today's sacred texts.

In the centuries since they were called into being as God's people, the
Israelites had known themselves to be God's special elect, God's chosen ones. Their perspective on their unique position in God's plan had been clearly enunciated and often affirmed (Deuteronomy 7:6-9), and there was a tendency to erect both virtual and real walls around themselves as if to separate God's chosen from the rest of humankind. These walls protected the clean from the unclean, the seemingly good from those thought to be evil, the saved from those outside the pale of God's salvation. These walls even crept into the Jewish Temple; although God-fearing non-Jews were allowed in, they were relegated to a certain court, separate from those thought to be God's chosen ones. But a different attitude toward non-Jews is reflected in today's text from Trito-Isaiah. Here the prophet envisions foreigners participating fully at every level of Jewish life and worship. There are no walls in the prophet's vision -- only a house of prayer for all peoples.

But divisions are not easily dissolved, and walls are difficult to tear down. For that reason, Jesus frequently addressed the separations that distinguished one person from another. Among his contemporaries, the Canaanite woman and her daughter would have been regarded as undeserving of God's care and Jesus' attention. A woman, a supposed sinner and a non-Jew, she probably felt herself to be a prisoner, walled in by several layers of prejudice, resentment and suspicion. But Jesus, who did not erect or respect such walls, healed her in response to her sincere faith and intrepid hope.

Paul clung to a similar hope regarding his Jewish brothers and sisters who had not accepted Jesus as their Messiah. He pleaded with those who continued to remain behind walls of rejection and disbelief. He himself had worked at bulldozing the walls that separated Jew from gentile, and he prayed his efforts would ignite a desire in his fellow Jews for the all-inclusive Gospel that he preached.

Today, walls continue to segregate God's people. While some of the most notorious of these have fallen, like the Berlin Wall or the Iron Curtain, others are in the process of being built, like the one along the U.S.-Mexico border. But walls are not only political; they are also economic, as in treaties and agreements that marginalize and disenfranchise people. Walls can also be social and emotional, as in the walls we raise against others who are different or unwanted, or who are deemed unforgivable and unlovable. Some walls are even self-imposed as a means of protecting ourselves from others or as a way to avoid being involved in the frequent messiness of life.

Whatever the reason for the origin of the walls, the results are often the same. As in Wilde's story, a walled-in garden soon becomes a desolate place. To avoid this sense of loss and isolation, we might do well to remember the wisdom of John Chrysostom: "What wall, strongly built with well-compacted and large stones, is as impregnable against the assaults of the enemy as a united band of believers, joined by mutual love and sealed by oneness of mind?"

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