



Fences

November 10, 2021

Rachel Yates

Remember Wilson Wilson, Jr., the neighbor on the old sitcom *Home Improvement*? Over the show's many seasons, we only saw the top of Wilson's head, peering over a shared fence with Tim "the Tool Man" Taylor. On Sunday afternoon, I was reminded of this character as we peered over our fence to see our neighbor. Going a step beyond *Home Improvement*, we held hands over the top of the pickets and giggled. Well, more specifically, my grandson did.



At the home we're remodeling, the two backyards were originally shared, with only some short, scraggly bushes delineating the property line. Early on, both homeowners agreed that a fence was a good idea, for one to contain pets and for the other to contain children. So we agreed on a design and split the cost for a 6-foot privacy fence. It does what it's supposed to, I guess, but we miss seeing the neighbors.

My grandson this weekend could hear his friend on the other side of the fence, playing in her yard. He desperately wanted to get to her, but he was cut off by the fence. Finally I held him up over my head and let him stand on one of the rails, so he could peek into their backyard. His friend stood on something that gave her enough height to look over in our direction. They could see the tops of each other's heads and reached out to each other, giggling with delight.

I wonder about fences. They can certainly help with strained relationships, if the only way to live peaceably is to ignore each other. They can provide security or safety. They also cut us off.

The Old Testament is replete with references to fences, walls, and fortresses; the New Testament not so much. I am especially drawn to Ephesians 2:14-15 (NRSV) in which Jesus tears down the walls that divide us: "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace...."

Without doubt we have literal fences, perhaps even around our church buildings. Can we also call to mind the figurative fences that we've built? What is cutting us off from our neighbors? As we regard ourselves emerging from the pandemic, I pray we can perhaps peer over any fences of culture, dogma, exclusion, racism, elitism, and security that we've built and see who's on the other side. I can imagine people I've excluded out of fear or a sense that we'll get along better if we keep our distance. I've no doubt that I've excluded people unintentionally by dint of following historic processes and practices – doing things "the way we've always done them" – even though those processes and practices stemmed from inequity and desired segregation.

If Jesus has come to tear down the dividing wall and dissolve the hostility between us, perhaps the least we can do is hoist someone up to take a peek at what lies beyond. The promise of a new humanity awaits and, if we're open to it, the joy of hand-holding and uncontainable giggles as we reconnect with those on the other side.