

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

January 30, 2022

Sister Pat Coughlin, OSB, D.Min.

Jer 1:4-5, 17-19; 1 Cor 12:31—13:13; Lk 4:21-30

Lutheran pastor David Lose begins a homily by quoting from Robert Frost's "Mending Wall." It's spring and two neighbors are working together, replacing stones that have fallen from the wall that separates their property over the winter. The speaker in the poem wonders why they need a wall: "My apple trees will never get across, And eat the cones under his pines. I tell him. He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.' Spring is the mischief in me and 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.... He will not go behind his father's saying, And he likes having thought of it so well, He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors'.

"The Jesus we just heard about in today's continuation of last Sunday's gospel reading, would probably agree with the poem's speaker when he says, "Something there is that doesn't like a wall."

Jesus has been in the desert for 40 days grappling with Satan's invitation to dazzle his people with spectacular feats, and he is ready to begin his mission. According to what the people in his home town have heard, he has been performing miracles at Capernaum.

The portion of the scroll that Jesus chose carefully in last week's gospel was from Isaiah and was addressed to the Israelites who were coming home from the exile in Babylon. God was promising a future of prosperity and justice for them, with foreigners as their servants. No wonder the people of Nazareth were expecting great

things of Jesus. He had, in so many words, claimed that he was the longed-for anointed one.

You can't blame the hometown people for looking forward to great things for their town; Jesus had announced a year of favor. Why wouldn't they be thinking, "This is going to be great. We have known him all of his life, and he will take care of us. He'll do what we want. He'll make this place special; he'll bring us status. People will envy us. At last, we can be proud of being Nazarenes. No more poverty, unfreedom, broken hearts, sickness here. The Roman oppressors will be gone.

Then everything changed. Jesus knew that these good things were expected to happen only to those who were inside the protective walls of their identity as the chosen people. He challenges them to break down their walls with reminders of God's love for other peoples. Their praise and excitement turn into rage in a foreshadowing of his crucifixion.

It's easy to look down on those Nazarenes' and take pride in our openness to people of other cultures, races, classes, political and theological differences. But such love can be sentimental, self-congratulatory, and untested.

When we hear St. Paul's sublime hymn to love, written to a community whose members couldn't get along with each other, we have to remind ourselves that love is not just a good feeling.

Diane Bergant writes, "When we are young we think we know so much about love. As we get older we realize how little we know about love," but it's still very, very hard to love people who are annoying, overbearing, clueless, mean, self-serving, especially

in these tense years of pandemic. And if we're self aware we come to realize that at times we are all these things too, and that God wants to lift the oppression, the poverty, the blindness and the sickness of the people we can't stand. Time and time again we are reminded that love is hard; it's messy; sometimes it's close to impossible.

Real love knows its limitations, (There are times we need walls when there is a cow invasion.), but it's open to hospitality and stretching boundaries. We see in a mirror dimly, and we don't have all the answers but very time we respond to others with patience and kindness, truth and forbearance we take a small step in healing the world. "Something there is that doesn't like a wall."