

bread for the journey

Who is my neighbor?

Easy answer.

My neighbor is the friendly family on either side of our yard. He is the guy who takes in my mail when I am on vacation. He is the kid who shovels my driveway in an emergency and pushes me out of a ditch when I do a doofus slide into one. I do the same for them. We look out for each other.

A poet once said good fences make good neighbors. Not sure what he meant, but I suspect he meant something other than a privacy fence. My hunch is a good fence makes for good neighborliness especially in the spring after winter's stormy blasts have damaged the posts and stones built up and around them.

Here are a few lines from Robert Frost's "Mending Wall." He is the one who first said it—twice. I have taken the liberty to mess with it a little bit—not to change or add to it but dis-include a few lines so it makes sense—for our purposes here.

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
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:
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down. But ... 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."*

Frost is not so certain either that a wall between neighbors is a good thing. His neighbor is. Broken fences offer an opportunity

in the spring of the year to work together on a broken wall. His father taught him good fences make good neighbors. They bring us together from the coze and comfort of our homes to work together, perchance to speak to one another, and one could only hope to understand, know and learn to love each other, too.

My neighbor is the one next door. He is someone I am comfortable with, someone I trust with my spare keys. It's all about conviviality and being there for one another during times of need or even during times of storm and stress. That's my neighbor.

Along comes Jesus—you knew he would—to spoil cushy assumptions. Neighbors are not always likeable or easy to love. Neighbors can bring the best out in you, but a lousy neighbor can bring out the beast. A child got killed not too long ago because a neighbor on neighborhood watch was allegedly doing his job watching for invasive thugs on the prowl who were there to deal drugs and such. You remember the story. Assumptions were made. Violence happened. All in the name of being a good neighbor.

Robert Frost and Jesus are anachronisms. I tease my wife now that we have moved to an apartment near the Chicago Loop. I tell her I have learned to hunch my shoulders, do a little slithering down an alleyway and make certain to look this way and then that. Before I moved to the city, I would push a button in my car to open the garage door and then push it once again so it would close the moment I entered. Safe and sound. Home. No bad guys or unwanted neighbors to disturb my peace.

Along comes Jesus to push my button—my other button—the one attached to my soul, the one who alerts me to my other neighbor, the one who is not so pleasant to be around such as that homeless fellow sleeping on a park bench. I can overlook that



Homeless Jesus on a park bench

(continued on back)

other neighbor because he is merely a child or an adolescent who just can't seem to get his life off crack and on track. Just the other day, I walked by a few of them along the Magnificent Mile in Chicago. It was as easy as pie to *unfriend* them on the *facebook* of my soul.

I'm not comfortable with that neighbor. Good fences and sensors keep strangers away. You see, I don't always get Jesus "in here," in my heart of hearts. Jesus doesn't buy into a merely defense-minded soul-set. He has no time for people who have no time for the least and the lost—the child he wants to come to him, put his arms around and be with.

I love Jesus, but sometimes, I do not know whereof I speak. Jesus lives and dies for neighbors I don't want to hang with. I may share a common communion cup with them or open a soup kitchen on their behalf. I will even support a treatment center

for God's sake or my safety's sake, so they can kick a habit. But don't ask me to love them. Let them be mission projects. But pals, friends, good neighbors who go down to the property line during the spring to repair a fence together? No way. Come to think of it, I guess that is a picture of hell—lots of fences to keep the "other" out of my back yard and out of my heart as well.

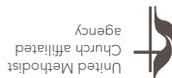
Both Frost and Jesus would ask us to gather around those fences in the spring of the year to mend whatever divides us. Let us come together because like a good neighbor, Jesus is there—for all of us. He is the all-inclusive Lord and Savior of us all. 



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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Rosecrance, Church Relations Coordinator. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with substance use and mental health disorders. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.