

Bad Storms Make Good Neighbors

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Robert Frost in his great poem *Mending Wall* tells the story of two neighbors who meet every spring at the wall that divides their property. It is a stonewall that every winter loses some of its stones which fall to one side or the other creating gaps. And on a spring day each year the two neighbors meet to put the stones back in place and to keep the wall erect and complete. As they go about this annual ritual of “mending” the wall, Frost wonders with his neighbor if there is any point to reconstructing the wall since the wall was originally there to keep the cattle from roaming from one property to the next – but neither has cattle anymore ... now all they have is orchards and that there is little risk of the fruit wandering from one field to the next. Why must we keep rebuilding this wall? His neighbor’s response is the now timeless phrase, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Frost’s response is,

*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 offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.*

When life gives us the luxury you and I are pretty good at building walls, or at least establishing boundaries. What’s mine is mine, what’s yours is yours. Is the tree on your property or is it on my property? Where does my lawn end and yours begin? Automatic garage door openers allow us to slip into the sanctuary of our houses without neighborly contact. Civil engineers have drawn the exact line between my back yard and your back yard lest there be any confusion. Good fences make good neighbors. And you can’t fault the sentiment – it makes all the sense in the world – if what you believe is that a neighbor is someone you’ll let get close, but not too close. Someone you’re happy

to touch base with and catch up with across the fence, but someone whose business you don’t want to make your business. Keep replacing those stones so there is no confusion – you are who you are and I am who I am.

I suppose life feels cleaner that way.

And yet it may be one of the great human delusions. As smart as we are and as logical as our minds may work – this thought that we don’t necessarily need each other may be one of our greatest self-deceptions. Because the truth is the universe doesn’t work that way. We are connected to each other whether we want to be or not. We are interrelated to each other whether we see it or not. Each entity in the world affects all the other entities.

You’ve heard me talk before of the work of Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist of fifty years ago, who was using a numerical computer model in trying to come up with a long term weather forecast and when he was rerunning the model instead of using a factor of .506127 he took a short cut and used just .506 instead, a miniscule variation – but what he found was a drastically different forecast. He realized that just a slight variation of factors significantly changes the outcome. Dropping the .000127 was enough to determine an entirely different outcome. It’s where we get the butterfly effect theory from. The smallest actions can result in the largest of outcomes. And so it goes that the flap of a butterfly’s wings over Brazil can cause a hurricane to form over the Atlantic.

Which makes me want to find that blasted butterfly that got Irma up and running!

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *The Luminous Web*, says it this way: “Whatever language you prefer, the apparent truth is that we belong to a web of creation in which nothing, absolutely nothing, is inconsequential. The hairs of your head, a baby’s sneeze, the gravitational pull of an electron at the far edge of the Milky Way -- none of these things is negligible. Not one of them can be subtracted from creation, or even rounded off, without changing the whole gorgeous geometry of the universe.” We

“The wellness of our souls lies not in what fortune has come our way. It lies in what fortune we find in each other.”

depend far more upon each other than we can ever know.

As much as we may want to distance ourselves from the guy across the street, the attendant at the bank, the government official down at the courthouse, the horses in the barn, the cows in the field, the stream down the way, the sky above, the ocean deep, the sun and the moon and the stars – we’re all whether or not we see it, whether or not we wish it, we’re all connected. We need each other.

It may be the biggest thing Irma had to teach us. This storm has been a part of our lives for the past couple of weeks – and two weeks ago it was something easy to ignore. A little cyclone out there in the middle of nowhere. But the little cyclone got to be a big cyclone and the big cyclone couldn’t quite figure out where she wanted to go. Actually, she knew all along where she wanted to go, but we couldn’t figure it out. Irma was a science experiment and not divine commentary. And while most of us would admit to hoping Irma would not come our way – at the same time we did not wish her on anyone. Right? We did not wish her onto the east coast or to any coast. Right? Because we are connected to each other. Last weekend we were not just Sarasotans ... we were Venitians and Ft. Myerians and Napolians and Floridians and Southeastern Americans. We were human beings connected to each other and connected to some blasted butterfly in Brazil!!

And so what did we think to do when the storm came? We thought to come together. People found other people. Neighbors helped other neighbors shutter their houses. Family members connected. Friends took in friends. All socio-economic classes laid side by side in shelters. First responders put on their uniforms. Utility trucks sped down from New England. Georgians offered freed food and water to evacuee’s crossing over the southern border. Folks without power stayed with folks who had it. Bad storms make good neighbors, right? Bad storms take the veil from our eyes so that we can see what the world really looks like – an interconnected web. People needing people. Creation needing creation.

And somewhere in the middle of it we are given a glimpse of the Creator. Oh, we are tempted to look for the creator in the trail of Irma’s path – wondering why here and not there? But that’s beside the point. The point is that we are deeply connected and the great joy of life is found in how we lose our oneness to our selves, and find our oneness with all of what God has created.

It is, I suppose, what Paul was getting after as he talked to those Corinthians about the body of Christ. It’s not that Paul was trying to come up with a new idea about how to organize a new community – Paul was reaching back to the beginning of time to how it all came together. And it all comes together in being connected. “In him all things hold together,” Paul says

in Colossians. The body of Christ – is a foot connected to a hand and an eye connected to the ear. They have desperate need for each other. We get closer to the truth of God the closer we get to one another.

Three guests came under the McConnell roof this weekend along with a couple of dogs – none of us had shared an evening before, let alone two, let alone in a hurricane. But when the wind picked up and the lights went out – what did we have? We didn't have cable. We didn't have the microwave. We didn't have the refrigerator. But we had each other. And there's something about that kind of community that beats Netflix.

In times of luxury or fortune we are tempted to dwell on these gadgets we have and even call them the blessing of God – oh but that would really sell God short wouldn't it? We might be tempted to think God was the One who spared us from the harshness of Irma – but I wouldn't dare say that to my flooded friend in Ft. Myers. That would be selling God short, wouldn't it? God can't be that small. The One who set the entire universe into motion with love – and connects us to the stars and the butterflies – this God wouldn't play favorites now would he? Of course not. But what he seems to want to do – is to show us how connected we are. How much we need each other.

Martin Rinkart was the Lutheran pastor of a little church in Eilenburg – in Saxony, Germany. Seventeenth century. During the throws of the Thirty Years war – refugees flocked into the walled city of Eilenburg to escape the killing. And with them they brought the bubonic plague. People in the little town died at the rate of fifty a day – and it was the job of the local pastor, Pastor Rinkart to bury them. Eight thousand died in that town and among them was Rinkart's own wife.

Stunning then, isn't it, to know that Martin Rinkart composed the words to the hymn (I'm sure maybe you know) with which we began our worship, *Now Thank We All Our God*. Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things have done, in whom his world rejoices. Who from

our mothers' arms, hath blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

Countless gifts of love? Thirty years war? Bubonic plague? Death of a spouse? No, God is not in those things – God is in the pastor and his people caring for the sick and afraid. These are the countless gifts of love.

And maybe that's what Horatio Spafford was thinking when misfortune came his way like a hurricane. A successful 18th century businessman and Presbyterian elder, he first lost a son, and then his four daughters when their cross-Atlantic voyage ended in their ship's sinking. Following that he lost most of his business interest in the great Chicago Fire and the succeeding economic downturn. With virtually nothing and with Christian friends blaming their misfortune on what sin they must have committed, the Spaffords boarded a ship for Palestine and set up a new home in Jerusalem and began a new life and a new mission – a new church actually – called the American Colony. Their mission to organize soup kitchens, clothes closets, homeless shelters, orphanages, hospitals for the hurting in Jerusalem. They engendered the trust of Christian, Jew and Muslim alike. Which prepared them for the wake of World War I and the fall of the Ottoman empire, and the sea of refugees flooding the city. It was Horatio Spafford's community who were there with trust and with countless gifts of love.

Which explains perhaps why it's Horatio Spafford's name that is listed in the old hymnbooks above the hymn we will sing in a minute, "It is Well with My Soul". Words that came to Spafford's mind when his ship passed close to where his daughters perished:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Our fortune lies not in ourselves. Our fortune lies in the fortune of others. Bad storms make good neighbors. The wellness of our souls lies not in what fortune has come our way. It lies in what fortune we

find in each other.

When the poet Walt Whitman left the comfort of his Washington home to serve as an orderly in the medical tents of the Union camps he brought himself face to face with the devastation of the Civil War. Some of his greatest poetry came from that service including the line, "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person."

And maybe that's what the apostle is telling us. Maybe that's what the Savior is telling us. Maybe that's what all the wise one's from all the ages are telling us. That as much as we might want to keep that stone-wall between us and our fellow human beings – that just isn't the way world is. It's the world wide web that enfolds us. We are as essential to the creation as the creation is essential to us. We are as essential to our neighbor as our neighbor is essential to us. No such thing as a good wall making a good neighbor in the kingdom of heaven. Bad storms maybe, but not good walls. And in this mysterious web all the joy comes from the countless gifts. The countless gifts of love.



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Church of the Palms

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