

**Homily, St. Andrew's  
Baptism of Jesus, Jan 10, 2016**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Paula McLain's novel, *The Paris Wife*, is a story of Ernest Hemingway's "first" wife, Hadley Richardson about their life together, mostly in the glittering 1920's Paris. Near the end of the story, as their marriage is breaking up largely due to an affair, Hadley reflects: "Ernest once told me that the word paradise was a Persian word that meant 'walled garden.' I knew then that he understood how necessary the promises we made to each other were to our happiness. You couldn't have real freedom unless you knew where the walls were and tended to them. We could lean on the walls because they existed; they existed because we leaned on them. With Pauline's coming, everything had begun to tumble..." (296)

When I read this passage early last week, I was struck by its great description of boundaries and it has stayed with me and rumbled around with today's theme of baptism. Hadley was thinking about marriage vows, of course, not baptism, and the "walls", the boundaries, the commitment those vows meant to her and Ernest's freedom and happiness together. But I think that the concept can be applied to other kinds of commitments and boundaries, including baptism.

"You couldn't have real freedom unless you knew where the walls were and tended to them." This is a statement that runs counter to our culture today. The direction our society has taken in the past half-century or so has been towards breaking down boundaries and taking down walls, often in the name of freedom. Completely opposite to Hadley's reflection, freedom is usually understood as being as unbounded as possible, restriction-free, without limitation or definition. To live in this way is to embrace unlimited consumption, to never experience the peace of "enough" or to rest. Most importantly, to be free, one must rarely, if ever, make a commitment. To commit to something - one person, one ideology, one religion - is to be unacceptably limited. To commit is to create a boundary, a wall, that is anathema to our society's definition of freedom. It is opposite to Hadley's idea that: "We could lean on the walls because they existed; they existed because we leaned on them." Instead of seeing any value in leaning on walls, like for a moment of rest, perhaps; or even vigorously pushing against them, we just don't want them at all. It means we have to stand on our own 2 feet, all the time.

All this is to help us first to understand the deep and abiding shifts in our culture. They are shifts that seriously challenge much of how Christian faith has been understood and lived out in earlier generations. Over the years I've found that it can be hard for some to understand just how much the rejection of boundaries and fear of commitment matters and how deeply this change impacts how we effectively express our faith. And it needs to be said that the approach of trying to fortify crumbling walls - attempting to re-enforce rules or build higher only works if you can create enough fear about life beyond the walls. Mostly, it just doesn't work.

The issue of changing boundaries in our world is played out particularly around our sacramental life. We could debate which of the sacraments is undergoing the greatest change in our generation... a case can certainly be made that it is marriage. For instance, I will be in Banff

this week for a required Diocesan clergy meeting to “generously listen” to one another around possible changes to the Marriage Canon - changes that could include same-sex relationships in our understanding of marriage.

That said, a case can also be made that it is our sacraments of initiation and belonging - baptism and confirmation - where the greatest transformation lies. When confirmation seized to be the “wall” that marked full belonging and inclusion as a member of the church, some say it became a sacrament searching for a purpose. Confirmation is no longer required to fully participate in our celebration of Eucharist nor does it have any “legislative” meaning in terms of church membership or leadership. As commitment to a particular denomination continues to seriously wane, people with all kinds of religious backgrounds, or no religious backgrounds, find their way not only into our pews but into leadership as well and confirmation is not required. Unlike some of my colleagues, I remain a supporter of confirmation... not as a requirement for full membership (I’m happy for that change) but as a guidepost - a sacrament of faithful and grown-up commitment to Christ and to Christ’s body. It matters not only for a “coming-of-age” ritual for teenagers, but also for adults who are choosing the Anglican church for the first-time or long-time or lapsed Anglicans who want to publicly declare their commitment after a time of development and growth. Because of our society’s rejection of commitment, I actually think our sacraments can have greater, deeper and more profound meaning than when they were blithely performed as a matter of course, or resented as a hoop to jump through.

Confirmation emerged as the dividing line - the wall - between the faithful and the unfaithful in the time of Christendom when everyone was baptized in infancy as a matter of course. If everyone is baptized, if everyone belongs, then there is no boundary in baptism. But that time is long past and there are probably more adults now who are \*not\* baptized than otherwise. Where the shift is felt most acutely, is among young parents who were themselves baptized, perhaps, or have some family history of church-attendance, but who have little to no meaningful connection to a community of faith as adults.

When I’m talking with parents about baptism for their child, particularly people I don’t know, or who aren’t active participants in the church, I always ask: “Why baptize? Why now?” I once had a first-time mother reply: “it’s really more important to our parents.” I appreciated the honesty but I did try to impress upon her and her husband that it wasn’t their parents, but themselves, who would be making the commitments. I basically tried to talk them out of baptizing, knowing that the mom’s parents, who I knew fairly well, would not be pleased. On the other hand, I remember another couple from that time, who expressed their uncertainty about baptizing their young one. It was the reason they hadn’t while he was really little and new. They recognized that they themselves weren’t all that connected to the church, weren’t sure what they believed and doubted if they should bring their child for baptism knowing it was unlikely they would fulfill their commitment. I had more hope that this second couple, the ones who struggled and debated, would begin to more actively participate in the faith community than those for whom it was a nice family ritual that didn’t really mean all that much.

The idea that real freedom is only possible when you know where the walls are and you tend to them is revolutionary. It seems to me that it’s easier to do the first part - knowing where the walls are; than the second - tending to them. Various church groups have made various attempts to define the walls of our faith, particularly over the past century or so. For instance, a

movement to delineate the fundamentals of faith in the late 19th and early 20th century created the term “fundamentalist.” In the late 20th century, there was a movement among some Canadian Anglicans to define the “Essentials.” We hold to the Apostle’s and Nicene creeds, the authority of scripture, the words of our liturgy, the practice of tradition... and debate where the walls should be. The debate scares us sometimes, but it’s really just tending to the walls and without it, the walls lose their purpose of helping us to know who we are... and that is where the freedom in them is found.

Baptism creates a boundary because in choosing follow Christ, we choose not to follow other ways, other paths. The most common thing people say who either choose not to baptize their child or who are considering it is the quandary, the desire, to not limit their child’s ability to choose their own path. The idea of the wall that limits exploration and choice often prevails over the idea that having some boundaries opens up a different kind of freedom. Rather than having to search endlessly for fulfillment and meaning, choosing boundaries can mean having a safe place for something beautiful to root and grow. Rather than needing to be constantly standing on our own 2 feet, always exploring and never arriving, a wall can provide support and a place to rest. There is a danger in becoming complacent, relying on the wall too much and not tending to it, but being without boundaries at all means there is never a place to lean. Choosing the walled garden over the endless wilderness means choosing enough... this place, these people, the love of God... it is enough. We are enough. Choosing the walled garden doesn’t mean we can never leave its safety and security to wander and explore... but it does mean that there is a place to return when our time of searching is over.

In baptism, we are confirmed in our identity as beloved children of God: “You are my child, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased,” says God. There is no greater freedom than in knowing that whatever we choose, whatever we do, whatever mistakes we make... God has chosen us as God’s own children, forever. We strive to hold up our end of the covenant simply as our response to God’s first, great and gracious love; and it is our way of actively participating in the life God has given to us.