

I was eating lunch at a restaurant the other day. I'd had a busy morning and was looking forward to sitting quietly, eating lunch, and starting a book Jim McClung had given me, *A People's History of the United States* by the Boston University professor Howard Zinn. The waitress brought my meal—ravioli with the sauce on the side, a garlic roll, and iced tea. I was going to have wine, but there was a Quaker from the Danville Meeting two tables away and I didn't want to be the subject of rumors. (Those of you who live in the city don't fully appreciate your freedom.) So I was just settling in to eat and read, when a man approached me. He said hello. I said hello back and asked him how we was, which he mistook as an expression of interest in his activities, so began to tell me all about his job as a fence salesman. It's been a great year for fences, he told me. Privacy fences—wood and vinyl, chain link fences—great for dogs when combined with a split rail fence, wrought-iron fences with spikes on top, the whole nine yards, all fenced in.

I was pondering the deeper meaning of our nation's growing interest in fencing, when he asked me what I did. I told him I pastored a Quaker meeting.

"That's interesting," he said. "I don't think it matters much what you believe, so long as you believe."

Then he told me about how he'd sold fencing to a church just the week before and wanted to know if we'd be interested in some.

"Probably not," I said. "Quakers aren't the barricade type."

I've been thinking about that guy ever since, about fences and his comment that it doesn't matter what we believe, so long as we believe. That wasn't the first time I'd heard someone say that, and I suspect you've heard it said, too. It doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you believe.

It's a distinctly American sentiment, rooted in two beliefs. The first is our cultural belief in the equality of religions. Despite the occasional persecution of religious minorities—we've recently witnessed the desecration of Jewish cemeteries in New York, Texas, Saint Louis, and Philadelphia and bomb threats made to Jewish and Islamic centers—the prevailing American sentiment is our assertion in the equality of religions. We've enshrined that belief in our constitution. *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...* Hence, the man saying, "It doesn't matter what you believe..." The second prevailing sentiment is that believing anything is better than believing nothing—"so long as you believe." America has not been a welcoming place for atheists. It would still be nearly impossible for an atheist or agnostic to be elected to public office.

But is it true that it doesn't matter what we believe, so long as we believe? That's what I've been thinking about this week, and I have concluded that I don't agree with the fence man. It matters very much what we believe. Because some beliefs build fences, they barricade some folks in and some folks out, and some beliefs don't.

It was the poet Robert Frost who wrote, "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out..." This is what beliefs do, what religions do, they wall in and wall out.

I know a woman who married outside her family's faith and was shunned. When her mother died, she wasn't permitted to attend her funeral. Can you imagine subscribing to a belief that would require you to shun your own child? It matters what we believe. Our beliefs wall in and wall out.

When the Jewish cemeteries were vandalized, a Muslim man from Tennessee named Tarek El-Messidi began a fund-raising campaign to repair the cemeteries. "I want to ask all Muslims to reach out to our Jewish brothers and sisters and stand together against this bigotry," he wrote on his Facebook page this week. His fellow Muslims donated \$155,000 to repair Jewish headstones. It matters what we believe. Our beliefs wall in and wall out.

Evil has many branches, but only one root—the belief in our superiority and the other's inferiority. When we believe the Christian is superior to the Jew, who is superior to the Muslim, who is superior to the atheist, we will turn a blind eye toward their oppression. When we believe the white man is superior to the black man, the native-born superior to the foreign-born, the male superior to the female, the straight better than the gay, we will justify their political, economic, and social exclusion.

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So here is Jesus, a friend to outcasts everywhere, a one-man committee dedicated to the elimination of barricades, fences, walls, blockades, barriers, ramparts, bulwarks, and partitions of every type. His mantra, his anthem was simple and clear—*come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest*. And they came to him—the poor, the sick, the prostitutes, the outcasts, the sinners, the immigrants, the aliens, the beaten down and beaten up. They came to him, and he gave them rest. The Greek word used there translates as refresh. *Come to me all who are worn down and wrung out and I will refresh you*.

So imagine you're a Jewish mother, a Jewish father in Philadelphia and you went to visit your child's grave, and found the headstone toppled on the ground, broken in half. And there's Muslim man in Tennessee who came along and stood beside you and said, "Let me fix that for you." *Come to me all who are worn down and wrung out and I will refresh you*. But the wall builders and fence sellers won't like it. Hard to make a living selling fences once folks figure out they don't need them. So they'll fight you tooth and nail on it. They'll say about you what they said about Jesus. "This man, this woman, receives sinners and eats with them." But you know what? If some fine, upstanding Christian isn't scandalized by the company you keep, you really aren't doing your job. Be refreshment, friends. Be rest. Put not your trust in fences, which separate and isolate. Put your hope in love, which brings us together and gives us rest.