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The Pastor's Message *July-August, 2010*

Dear Members and friends,

I have told you, now and again, about some of the highlights of journeying in the Holy Lands. I have mentioned primarily the big things, the beautiful things, or the highly symbolic things. One of the small things; one of the details that you might notice as you travel around the central hill country and throughout the Judean Wilderness is that there are no fences to mark off ownership of property; at least, not many. That has partly to do with laws and customs concerning ownership of the land but it is also about the nomadic heritage of the people. Many of those who live in the countryside have a Bedouin background or are themselves still Bedouins. These are the people of the land who live in tents and who move around the region with their herds and flocks, following the grazing grass. In such a society, things like boundary lines and fences become irrelevant. At most, you'll see, from time to time, small piles of rocks that mark the edge of one person's acreage and the beginnings of another's. Even those are largely informal nods to convention and have little or no meaning for day to day living.

Fences are primarily the instruments of those who have a fair amount of material things they want to protect or who have a modern and western sensibility about the ownership of property. Somehow, this world that God has entrusted to us has become an asset that is "ours." We do what we think we have to do in order to keep what belongs to us. Don't worry; this isn't a treatise on the evils of private ownership coming from someone who owns no property. In fact, we, as United Methodists, acknowledge the right of individuals to own property. Article 15 of the United Methodist Doctrinal Standards in the 2008 Discipline reads: "We believe God is the owner of all things and that the individual holding of property is lawful and is a sacred trust under God. Private property is to be used for the manifestation of Christian love and liberality, and to support the Church's mission in the world. All forms of property, whether private, corporate, or public, are to be held in solemn trust and used responsibly for human good under the sovereignty of God." (§103)

So owning things, owning property is just fine. The problems arise out of our skewed understanding about the relative value of the things we own. We create fences and safes and burglar alarms in order to keep what we have. Granted, in our society, measures of protection often seem prudent, but what I want to say about fences and indeed about all of the barriers that we erect between ourselves and others is that they help create and largely define a fractured society. That's not how God would like it to be. Dorothea of Gaza, an early Christian mystic, wrote: "If God is at the center, you cannot get closer to God without getting closer to your neighbor. We are born, we live, and we die with each other." This is an acknowledgement of the intention of God at Creation. To paraphrase a poem I wrote for the cover of last December's United Methodist Relay, there were "no fences in

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