

"Breaking Down The Walls"

Ephesians 2:11-22

July 19, 2015

8th Sunday After Pentecost

Back in the day, we did not fear Isis. We feared the Soviet Union. And we did not fear Islam, but communism. Back then, the world was divided into two main camps: communism and democracy. Nowhere was that division more graphically represented than in Berlin, Germany. To stem the tide of people fleeing communist control for freedom in the west, the Soviet Union constructed a wall to divide the city. It forced the East Germans to miss out on freedom in the west. The Berlin Wall became a sad symbol for unrelenting division.

I remember growing up and thinking that, no matter how good relations between the Soviet Union and America ever became, that wall would never ever come down. It would permanently divide communist East Germany from democratic West Germany. Maybe you felt the same way. We were wrong. On November 9, 1989, after over a quarter of a century, that wall came down. And those people from the east and the west who would never be united again (or so it was thought) were reunited into an entirely new nation of Germany. As the popular phrase goes, "Who'd have thunk it?"

There are still walls that separate people like the Berlin Wall did. Many of these "walls" are not made of brick and mortar but are created by attitudes and actions. Like the Berlin Wall, they separate people and give no hope of reunification. Unfortunately, many of these walls exist in the Christian Church.

This was the case in the early Church when a huge wall was erected between the Jews and Gentiles. The Jews had been chosen by God from the time of Abraham to be His special people. He had established a covenant with them and given them many promises, including the promise of a Messiah. He also gave them His Law with all of its regulations for worship, government, and moral living. The Jews used this Law as a wall. A wall can be used in two different ways. It can be used in a good way to keep people in and protect them from evil. A wall can also be used in a bad way to keep people whom we don't like out.

God wanted the Jews to use the Law to protect themselves from the evil surrounding them. He never intended for it to be used, however, to keep people out. God loved the Gentiles and did not want to exclude them from His blessing. However, the Jews used God's Law as a wall to keep the Gentiles away from God's promises. In fact, there was actually a stone wall in the temple in Jerusalem which separated the temple proper from the Court of the Gentiles. On this was an inscription which forbade any foreigner, any non-Jew, to go in, under pain of death."

Thus, feeling themselves superior, the Jews utterly despised the Gentiles and considered them to be vile, unclean dogs. "The Gentiles reciprocated in kind and hated the Jews because of their arrogance, their scornful separatism, their peculiar religious laws and ways." (Lenski, p.440) As our text says, this wall left the Gentiles "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world."

We still see those walls in the Church today. The wall of division arises in individual congregations, this one included. Peace Lutheran Church was established as a result of a division with a sister congregation. Divisions still exist within the church. There are divisions over how the church is being run and how money is being spent. There can be divisions over innovations vs. "the way we've always done it" mentality; over young people vs. old people; over long time members and new converts; over pastoral leadership; and so on. I'm sure that most everyone here today has found themselves on one side of a wall here in issues like this.

What do we do? Some would prefer to carry on the fight on their particular side of the wall. However, that leads to grumbling, fighting, and impeding the growth of God's Kingdom in this place. The walls have to come down. Yet that's not an easy task to accomplish. We are dealing here, not with a cloth curtain which merely hinders us, but a heavy stone wall which cuts us off from one another. The solution is difficult because the origin of the problem is difficult. The walls that separate us individually and as a congregation have their origin in a much bigger wall: the wall of sin that separates all people from God. The holy and righteous God who created and still rules the universe cannot allow sin into His presence. He symbolized that separation when the Israelites built their

places of worship. In the Old Testament, when they had a tent church called a tabernacle, God commanded the people to build a very fine purple curtain between the Holy Place and the most Holy Place. This would serve to separate sinful people from the holy God. In the New Testament temple in Jerusalem, there was still the separation of a thick curtain between God's most holy place and sinful people.

That separation continues today. Each of you, because of the sin of Adam, is born in sin and separated from God by the wall of your sinful self, a wall of your own construction. As you commit sin -- both doing that which is wrong and bad, as well as every failure to do what is good and right -- you make the wall thicker and more imposing. The wall becomes so huge that you are not able to go around it, over it, or through it. You are totally separated from God by the wall of your sin.

And, the sad thing is that not only do you wall off yourself from God by your sinful thoughts, words, and actions, but you are also walling yourself off from one another. Since there is nothing you can do to overcome the wall of sin between yourselves and God, there is nothing at all you can do to overcome the walls you have erected between yourselves and others.

The solution then is to take care of that first wall. God has already done that. He has removed the barrier through His Son, Jesus Christ. Our text for today says, "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." His death breaks down the barrier that exists between you and God. That was shown at the very moment of His death. The Gospel of Matthew tells us, "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." (Matthew 27:50-51) By paying the penalty for your sin, Jesus Christ removed it and opened the way to God the Father.

You have full forgiveness for all of your sins which cause division because, instead of a wall of sin between you and God, there is now a way to God through Jesus Christ who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." You are free and able to approach God. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us

through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."

The trouble that we have is that we only think in terms of that wall between God and us being destroyed. Christ's death accomplished much more than that. It also breaks down the barriers among us. In the text, Paul, speaking of the barriers between Jews and Gentiles says this, "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility." It is Christ who breaks down the barriers that exist among Christians in this congregation. His death not only gives you peace with God, but also peace with one another.

And, from that wall which God has brought to ruins, He builds something else. It is not merely a refurbishment or improvement of the old way where God's people exist as separate groups, such as the Jews and Gentiles did, each with their own agendas. God's purpose is to create an entirely new structure. "Divisions and distinctions no longer exist as far as the standing of any before God is concerned. God has made a way for the divided to become one." (Tyndale, p.81) Our text says that His purpose was "to create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility." By His love, He breaks down that hostility that exists among members of His Church and creates a new structure.

It is a structure not based on "haves" and "have nots" where some enjoy God's privilege and some don't, but one in which all our members of a common family. Our text says, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Each of you, whether old or young, long time member or new convert, innovator or traditionalist, is a member of God's family now. You are no longer adversaries fighting for your own way. You are brothers and sisters in Christ working towards God's way.

This new community not based on personal whim, opinion, or even majority rule. Paul says it is, "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone." In other words, God's family is a structure based on God's Word alone. From the prophets in the Old

Testament, to the apostles in the New Testament, to the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ, it is His Word alone that is to show the way. His Word corrects us when we err against God and against our fellow Christian. His Word brings us God's forgiveness when we wall ourselves off from him. His Word empowers us to love and forgive others who walled themselves off from us by their sin, as well as helping us see the walls we have built around ourselves and to ask for forgiveness. Finally, it is a structure that is "in progress". Some might think that, since all barriers are broken down, it doesn't matter what you do or say. Does the fact that God breaks down barriers mean that there is never a right way and a wrong way of doing things? No. Does it mean that there is never a right understanding of God's Word and a wrong understanding of God's Word? No. Does it mean that you will never ever disagree as Christians? No. Even though each of you have been forgiven and declared holy in God's sight, it doesn't mean that you yet live holy lives.

Paul writes, "In [him] the whole structure being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by his Spirit." Notice it says you "are being built together". You have been put on the foundation, but God continues to work on building you up. And he doesn't do it from a far away place. He dwells among us as a church and individually by virtue of our baptism. There will always be disagreements and fights in God's church. Satan will try to hand you the tools to rebuild the walls that separate you. Don't let him do it. Turn to God in prayer and meditate on His Word. Let Him build you up, rather than letting Satan build up the wall to cut you off from God and from each other.

When the Berlin Wall came down, there were initially some problems in adjusting. Yet I don't think there is a single person in Berlin who would want to see that wall built up again. In the same way, when a whole lot of different people become members of Christ's household, the church, there are always some problems in getting along with others. Yet I know there is not a single person here who would want to see that wall go up between God and ourselves again. Therefore, when you encounter walls here with other people, remember the great wall that has been torn down between you and God through Jesus Christ. That will make any wall between you and someone else seem

small. Then, look to Him who tore down that wall to tear down the walls that exist between you and other people. Trust in His power to to tear down those walls. And, above all things, continue to love, honor, and respect your fellow Christians, even when you don't agree with them. And those walls will come tumbling down. Amen