

Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

TEAR DOWN THIS WALL!

“Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

Many of us remember that speech well. Ronald Reagan issued that challenge in a speech at the Brandenburg Gate near the Berlin Wall on June 12, 1987. The occasion was the 750th anniversary of Berlin.

Up until this time Mikhail Gorbachev was a kind of rock star in Europe. He talked a lot about transparency and restructuring. He liked people to think of him as a bridge builder. And the American President was not given such good press in Europe.

But, Reagan successfully challenged him on this point. If you’re going to talk the talk, you have to walk the walk. How can you say that you are for freedom when the wall of hostility remains for all to see?

ANCIENT WALLS

There were high walls of hostility in the ancient world as well. Paul talks in his letter to the Ephesians about the dividing wall of hostility that existed between Jew and Gentile. He reminded the Gentiles that once they “were without hope and without God.”

Indeed, there was literally a wall that kept Gentiles out of the innermost parts of the Temple. There was a sign on that wall that said in many languages in no uncertain terms, "keep out."

Archaeologists have actually discovered one such sign. It read,

"Let no one of any nation go past the barrier around the holy place. If you disobey this command, you will be responsible for your own death."

But, according to Paul this is no longer true. Those who were "far away" have now been "brought near" by the blood of Christ.

UNIFIED BY THE NAME OF JESUS

Max Lucado spoke at one of those large revivals. This one happened to be at the Georgia Dome. He came to the podium and made a simple request,

"On the count of three," he said, "would you please shout out loud the name of the group or tradition or church body of which you are currently a member?"

One, two, three ..." Those present voiced their affiliations. Some were fortunate. All they had to shout was "Methodist" or "Presbyterian." One fellow rattled off "The Church of God of Prophecy Incorporated."

What everyone heard echoing through the Georgia Dome was an undifferentiated blob of sound.

Lucado followed with a second request.

"On the count of three," he said, "would you please shout the name to whom you have trusted your heart, your soul, your ministry, and your entire spiritual future? One, two, three ..."

And there rose, in unison, the sound of just two syllables that filled the entire dome: "Jesus!"

In the memorable moment that followed there was absolute silence -- as if the leaders of God's people were suddenly struck dumb by the realization that perhaps they have more in common than first assumed.

Perhaps the walls can fall down after all.

EASY TO SAY; HARD TO DO

We can all say the name of Jesus in unison at a sanctified pep rally, but sometimes I think we have a hard time putting the unifying message of Jesus into practice.

As someone suggested to me this week, “All this sounds good, but it also sounds too vague, too idealistic.” I understand. The power of prejudice is pervasive.

Indeed our passage for today begins with a reference to a prejudicial comment that was often made in the ancient world. Paul reminded the Ephesians that they were called the “uncircumcision” by the “circumcision.”

In other words Gentiles were outside the family of faith. These uncircumcised Gentiles were thought to be in a sense “unclean.”

Some Jewish believers in the early church thought Gentiles needed to become Jews before they could become Christians.

And some Gentile converts in the early church thought that they were spiritually superior. They thought that their Jewish brothers and sisters were too traditional and legalistic.

We can infer from Paul’s letter that there was still a rift between Jew and Gentile in the early church. Except, at this time, perhaps the Gentiles have the upper hand because there are more of them. How could Paul bring these two groups together?

Paul told the Gentiles, “Remember who you were before you were saved. You were nobodies, without hope and without God.”

And he told the Jews, “The dividing wall was broken down by Jesus. This hostility must come to an end because Jesus is your peace. You are now one in Christ Jesus. The old rules no longer apply.”

THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

I think it’s important to note that Paul says those who are far off are brought near “by the blood of Christ.” This is the key to understanding this passage.

You’ll remember that as Jesus died he said of those who crucified him, Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.”

And as it turns out this was not only a word of forgiveness for the enemies who put him to death. It was a word of forgiveness from God to the world.

When Christ died on the cross, the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was torn from top to bottom. That was symbolic of what Christ accomplished.

In Jesus Christ all were given equal access to God. Jesus tore down the wall that separated us from God and each other.

A CHURCH INSTEAD OF A WALL

And in place of the wall Jesus built the church. The church, according to Paul, is not a building but a people. The church is a people who follow the teachings of God's Word, the word of the apostles and the prophets. And the church is that place where the teachings of Jesus are put into practice.

Paul in our lesson for today wrote that Jesus is the cornerstone for our faith. A cornerstone was the first stone to be placed at an ancient construction site. Its function was to set the pattern for the building as a whole. In the same way, the life of Christ sets the pattern for the church.

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul said something similar. He wrote, "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."

One of the hymns we will sing today is "The Church's One Foundation." The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, our Lord. We can all agree upon that.

But, what does that really mean? What is foundational when it comes to the faith? I think the foundation of the church is grace.

And the life of this community is shaped by the grace of God as revealed in Jesus. In other words, the church is all about forgiveness.

God forgives our sin, and we forgive the sins of those around us. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." It's just that simple and just that complicated.

GRACE NOT WORKS

All this talk about walls coming down and people being united is preceded by a very famous passage, Ephesians 2:8-9. Many of you have memorized it. It reads,

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

In other words, the church is founded upon grace and not on works. Why is that important?

Well, according to the Bible, grace takes away boasting. If we are saved by grace and not because we are such good boys and girls, then we have no cause to put anyone else down.

But, we have ample reason to lift others up. Grace calls forth right action.

Properly understood the grace of God as revealed in Jesus makes us into gracious people.

Profound gratitude is the foundation, the cornerstone of the church. God's amazing grace guides our actions.

THE NAIL-SCARRED HAND

Philip Yancey tells a story about Dr. Paul Brand, a physician who for many years treated people in India that suffered from Hansen's disease, more commonly known as leprosy. As it was in the Bible these lepers were considered to be untouchable because of their disease.

One evening Dr. Brand found himself in an open courtyard packed with lepers. The air was heavy with the mingled odors of poverty, stale spices, and treated bandages. After a while the patients began to ask the doctor if he would speak to them for a few moments. Did he have any encouraging words?

As he looked over this gathering of "untouchable" human bodies, his eyes were drawn to their hands. Most of the hands he saw were drawn inward in the familiar "claw-hand" of the leper. Some had no fingers; some were just a few stumps. Many patients sat on their hands or otherwise kept them out of sight.

"I am a hand surgeon," he began. "So when I meet people, I can't help looking at their hands. The palm-reader claims he can tell your future by looking at your hands. I can tell your past. For instance, I can tell what your trade has been by the position of the calluses and the condition of the nails. I can tell a lot about your character. I love hands."

Brand went on, "How I would love to have had the chance to meet Jesus and study his hands."

He described what it might have been like to see the hands of Jesus as a little one, childishly grasping in the earliest years, then clumsily holding a brush or stylus in school.

Then came the rough, gnarled hands of Christ the carpenter, with the broken fingernails and bruises that inevitably come from working with a saw and hammer.

"Then," Brand continued, "there were his crucified hands.

It hurts me to think of a nail being driven through the center of my hand, because I know what goes on there, the tremendous complex of tendons and nerves and blood vessels and muscles. You can't drive a spike through its center without crippling it.

In that act Jesus identified himself with all the deformed and crippled human beings in the world. He shared poverty with the poor, and weariness with the tired -- and clawed hands with the crippled."

The effect of those words on the lepers was astonishing. Could it possibly be true that Jesus identified with them, those whom no one else would touch?

One by one the leprosy patients brought forth their hands and held them high for all to see, not ashamed at that moment that they were deformed and crumpled.

For someone else, the Someone who had created their hands, had once known their pain, and even been resurrected with a body that still bore the imprints of those nails.

Jesus Christ is uniquely able to identify with every man and every woman who has ever breathed. There is no "leper" beyond the touch of his love.

He is Lord over everyone who has ever been afflicted or misunderstood, and his grace is freely offered to the world, even to those in the world that we think are beyond saving.

MOVING THE FENCE

William Barclay tells a story about World War II. Some soldiers brought a dead comrade for burial in a cemetery. The priest told them gently that it was a Roman Catholic cemetery, and he was bound to ask if their friend had been a baptized adherent of the Roman Catholic Church.

The friends said that they didn't know. The priest replied that he was sorry, but if that was the case he could not permit burial in the churchyard. So the friends took their fallen brother and buried him just outside the fence of the churchyard.

The next day they came back to pay their respects at the gravesite, but to their amazement they couldn't find the grave. They knew it was only six feet from the fence of the cemetery, but search as the might they couldn't find any trace of freshly dug soil.

As they were about to leave, perplexed and confused, the priest came up. He told them that his heart had been troubled because of his refusal to allow the dead comrade to be buried in the churchyard.

So, early in the morning he rose from his bed, and with his own hands moved the fence to include the body of their friend.

Barclay concludes by saying, "Rules and regulations put up the fence. But, love moved it."

Isn't that a great illustration of what we are called to do as disciples of Jesus? We are called to be fence movers instead of fence builders.

Unfortunately, I see a lot more fence building than fence moving these days. Political and theological positions have become as hard as rock. We continue to build walls that separate us.

Don't misunderstand. This is an equal opportunity criticism. This is a criticism of the left and the right. It is a criticism of Presbyterians and Pentecostals, Gentiles and Jews.

All of us are guilty. Building walls has become a national and an international pastime.

It's hard to be a fence mover in a world that wants to build even higher walls. In fact sometimes the fence movers still get crucified for their effort.

I am often discouraged by my own lack of faith. Sometimes I catch myself building walls instead of tearing them down.

Thank God it doesn't depend just on us. God in Christ continues to change our hearts and minds. As Paul put it in our lesson for today, God isn't finished with us. We are being "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

In other words, we are a work in progress. We are God's building project.

I like to watch those TV shows where they tear down walls in a home and make a larger, more modern living space. It's amazing what a good carpenter can do in a few weeks.

And in the same way, it's amazing what the Good Carpenter can do in our life. He can still do what we cannot do on our own. He can tear down the walls that divide us and fill us with new life.

Lord, help us be open to the Your Divine remodeling project!

Amen.