

# BREAKING DOWN ALL WALLS

July 9, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Nancy J. Redman

First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

---

## SCRIPTURE

---

### **Ephesians 2:11-22**

<sup>11</sup> So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, <sup>[b]</sup> called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body <sup>[c]</sup> through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>[d]</sup> <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>[e]</sup> <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually <sup>[f]</sup> into a dwelling place for God.

---

## SERMON

---

Paul writes this letter from prison to friends in the church at Ephesus where he had spent three years preaching and teaching. Paul has a great fondness for the churches he established and his letters are a source of support and encouragement. He knows as the church grows there will be a temptation to form an exclusive community instead of seeking to include everyone who has yet to hear the gospel. These Christians in Ephesus know all too well what it means to be the outsider. The Jews had kept the Gentiles at arm’s length, accusing them of being unclean and standing outside the covenant of God. They built walls around the temple dividing the space into courts; the outer court was for Gentiles, the next for Jewish women, then Jewish men and finally the priests who alone had access to the innermost court; the Holy of Holies that Jews believed was the dwelling place of God. If a Gentile went beyond the outermost court the penalty was death. Paul was a well-educated Jew who persecuted Christians, then was converted by Jesus on the road to Damascus. It is believed that Paul attempted to take a Gentile past the barrier into a Jewish court and that was why he was imprisoned.

Walls, barriers, fences are part of the social, cultural and political landscape. We build them to keep the unsavory characters, enemies and aliens out of our nation, institutions, workplaces and neighborhoods. The Great Wall of China was constructed to keep Genghis Khan and the invaders at bay. The Berlin Wall dividing East and West Germany was built to keep East Berliners out of the more stable West Berlin. When the wall came down in 1989 the hope was

that Germany would be unified again. But instead of instant peace, there were still invisible walls of hostility and mistrust separating people from one another. We have a fence that divides the US from our Southern neighbor, Mexico. Those who are concerned about border security want to build a bigger, better wall that extends along the entire Texas border separating us from our neighbors to the south.

There are cultural and economic barriers that make integrating neighborhoods and communities difficult. We have heard neighbors of new housing developments complain when new apartment complexes include a few units for low income housing. The political landscape is divided on social, domestic and foreign policies. It seems that conversation and compromise are a thing of the past. The mindset is “my way or the highway.” The church builds walls too. Some conservative churches “fence” the Lord’s Table allowing only members to share in the meal provided by Jesus Christ. I know individuals personally who grew up in these congregations; after college or marriage they joined other denominations. When they visited their home congregation they were not welcome at the family table.

We begin the process of building walls very early; in the sandbox or classroom; playground or neighborhood where children decide who is “in” on the basis of gender, color, language, family origin, or physical characteristics. We separate ourselves into cliques, fraternities and sororities, clubs and organizations where membership is by invitation. Walls are built where people with opposing opinions are shut out of conversations that could lead to compromise and positive actions for society’s benefit. When someone we care about hurts us or ignores our needs we protect our feelings by putting up barriers. We nurse our hurts and stay silent instead of sharing our feelings and working toward understanding and reconciliation. These strained relationships between friends, family and colleagues can last for years unless someone has enough strength and courage to start a conversation that might break down barriers and lead to healing.

Paul uses the word hostility to describe the enmity that separates us from one another. The Christian community that Paul established at Ephesus is dealing with old patterns of enmity between Jews and Gentiles. According to the Jews, Gentiles were outside the covenant of God with no hope of redemption. Paul’s message is that Christ came so that the two: Jews and Gentiles might become one, a new creation. Christ has established a new order where the old rules and regulations that once separated Jew and Gentile no longer have the power to divide. Jesus came to break down the walls; like the ones surrounding the temple, so all could know the love and grace of God made known in Jesus Christ. When we can break down our own dividing walls of hostility and join ourselves to Christ there will be peace.

Rita Snowden tells this story from WWII. Soldiers in France brought the body of a dead comrade to a French cemetery for burial. 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 member of the Roman Catholic Church. They said they didn’t know. The priest said he was sorry, but he could not permit burial in his churchyard. So the soldiers buried their comrade just outside the cemetery fence. The next day they couldn’t find the grave and the priest appeared as they were about to leave. He told them that his heart had been troubled because of his refusal to allow their friend to be buried in the churchyard. So early that morning he had risen from his bed and with his own hands had moved the fence to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.

Paul reminds us that Christ has moved the fences. Christ has broken down the walls that divide and shattered the barriers that separate us from one another. We are no longer strangers and aliens but by Christ's blood all people can see the face of God up close and personal. Just imagine what that must have meant for those Gentile Christians who had committed their lives to Jesus Christ. The Jews called them names and refused them access to the temple on the threat of death. Now by God's grace through the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection the Gentiles along with the rest of humanity are part of the household of God with all its benefits and responsibilities.

The cross of Christ makes us one and that means the churches' doors must be open to all who want a relationship with Jesus Christ. We cannot deny anyone access to the Lord's Table or the baptismal font; Jesus invites all who want to be cleansed by baptismal waters and fed at Christ's table to be welcome in God's beloved community. When we discriminate in any way we cut ourselves off from connecting with a child of God who would benefit from knowing the Savior. It is difficult to change our attitudes and actions toward those who are not like us. But the gospel calls us to leave our comfort zones and risk our security in order that the gospel message is lived out and shared with others.

As people of faith we are called to leave the safety of our own experiences, in order to discover how others with different experiences see and understand the world. In order for those dividing walls to come tumbling down we must consciously work on opening ourselves to people we would generally exclude. When we take time to initiate conversations that seek to know one another beyond what our senses tell us, we discover the amazing grace of God who makes us one in Christ. As relationships grow we learn how much we have in common and our differences seem to fade away. We need each other to get the full benefit of our collective experiences, ideas and observations. Not one of us has a corner on the truth – Jesus Christ is the only Cornerstone on which to build our lives. He has already welcomed the stranger into the faith community. All that remains is for us to dismantle the walls we use to separate us from one another and ultimately from the wideness of God's goodness, grace and love.

The hymn that follows the sermon which may be new to you, is based on our text from Ephesians. It is a modern version of Paul's message to believers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We begin by singing to Christ whose attributes include; gracious power, persistent truth, inclusive love, and unmeasurable grace. When we are partners with Christ in the work of reconciliation and peace, we will see: walls of fear tumble down, fisted minds opened, love encircling every race. We will see a world that embraces peace. With one voice we rejoice at what God has done for us in the past, is doing now in our lives, our homes and communities and will continue to do as long as there are people who build their lives of faith on the cornerstone who is Christ Jesus, the living Lord whose cross has made us one. Amen.