

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 19, 2015
St. Paul's - Peoria, IL
The Rev. Jenny Replogle

I went to high school at a small private Christian school. As with any school, there were budget constraints that meant that some textbooks were not updated very often. One of these was ninth grade geography - I think it was assumed that geography didn't change much and so it was usually passed over when buying updates

And so, in 1998, my classmates and I were entertained to read, "Though there has been work to reunite Germany, the divisions between East and West are too great to ever be overcome." And yet there we were, most of us barely remembering a time when the country was separated because we were all under 6 when the Berlin Wall fell.

I came to understand a little more about the divide when I visited a German friend. We went to a museum in Berlin that did an incredible job helping you experience each era of German history. When it came to the time that East and West Berlin were separated, not only was there an explanation of the history, but there were replicas of parts of every day life on each side of the wall - offices and living rooms, fashion and cars. As I walked through the different rooms, it gradually made more sense to me why my textbook had made the prediction that it had - the wall was not simply a physical divide between people, but had become a division in the very way of life on each side.

Throughout history, we have created figurative and literal walls between ourselves, which stay erected for generations, centuries, millennia, to the point that we cannot understand or even imagine sharing life with those on the other side.

Today's reading from Ephesians talks about one of these, the most divisive in the early Church - the division between Jews and Gentiles. In our passage, Gentiles are told from a Jewish perspective, "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."

Without God in the world - this is a really strong, even offensive phrase that was actually used by *both* sides. Jews were disgusted with Gentile, pagan rituals and cults by which they worshipped their gods, trying to please and satiate their personalities, especially with excessive sexual practices. And Gentiles, Greeks and Romans, were flabbergasted by the Jewish way of worshipping one God in one temple, with all sorts of strange laws, especially those that seemed to them to denigrate the glory of the human body by avoiding nudity and what they saw as mutilating every baby boy by circumcision. The way each group saw the world was so fundamentally different that they could not imagine the other having a relationship with the same God as themselves - and so they saw each other as without God in the world.

And that is what is incredible in this passage from Ephesians. This passage is at the heart of the Gospel, the good news of the incredible work God is doing among us. "For Christ 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." He is creating "in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace."

In Christ, those divisions that seemed fundamental, irreversible in their world, in Christ, those walls are being broken down. In Christ, those who saw each other as without God now "both have access in one Spirit to the Father."

What the writer is speaking of here is the core of who the church is - an explanation of what was happening among the early church. The context of the world they are living in is incredibly important. The Roman empire is in charge. They have conquered the whole known world and are trying to bring it under one peaceful rule - the Pax Romana. They claim that they are building a whole new world, where people live and work together in peace. In this network, different people were brought together. There were citizens and non-citizens, Greeks, Romans, and conquered peoples like Jews, slaves and free, male and female - mostly people ruled by an elite, but everyone knew where they fit and were able to experience a new kind of peace because of the common system. They were all brought together under Caesar by his military might or the persuasion of being part of the wealth of the empire.

When a city, a gathering of people came under this rule, when they became part of this new, vast connection of people, when they agreed to proclaim and live that Caesar is Lord, do you know what it was called? An *ekklesia*. Do you know how we translate that today? Church.

Those first disciples borrowed the term to describe their gatherings. They believed that when Jesus Christ overcame death and rose again that something had fundamentally changed in the world. They shared the Jewish belief that God was at work healing the whole world, making a new humanity, reconciled to God. But they believed that when Jesus died and rose again, that this work became present in our world in a new way. They believed that God's original dream for the world was available now for all people, and that it was happening among them healing all that was broken within each heart and all that was broken in the way we related to each other. The whole world was being brought back together through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This new reality was not for them alone; it was not for them to enjoy a peaceful, happy existence. It had to be shared, so they went about telling the ends of the earth, inviting others to join in the joy of this fellowship. This fellowship, this way of sharing life was radically different from what anyone had seen. Living together were citizens and non-citizens, Gentiles and Jew, slave and free, male and female, but they called each other *brother and sister*. They were people who no one could imagine sharing life, but some power had brought them together, allowed them to see each other as equal in the image of God.

Just by sharing life, their lives questioned the power of military might and wealth of Rome because *the power at work among them was able to bring peace that the Pax Romana never could*. There was power at work among them, and their lives asked people which power they wanted to be part of - the power of the empire, or the power of the risen Christ bringing people together, making a new humanity there among them.

This is the story of the beginning of the church - the way they proclaimed by their lives that Jesus was alive and among them. This is still our story today - the people we are to be in our world. God is still longing for the church to be the place where the new humanity is being made as walls fall that we never believed could be broken down.

This is no less revolutionary in our world today - there are plenty of these walls aren't there? I saw a quote recently that said it well: "My Facebook feed looks like a war broke out between the Confederacy and a Skittles factory." I was born and went to a Southern Baptist college in Mississippi, then went to seminary and worked in an Ivy League town for most of the last decade, so that pretty well described what I saw every time I logged on - a very visible reminder that friends and family who I care deeply about who see the world in fundamentally different ways. Of course, these divides are not new at all, but they became incredibly obvious over those days.

Sometimes it seems that we are more polarized than ever, and it's hard to believe that God could make peace among us. But the truth is that these walls have always been among us, always deeply. The issues of the day change, but we have always found ways to erect walls between us. It's how we work.

Even this tendency to separate from each other and build barriers points to our created nature. We all are created to be in relationship to God, and God made us also to find being and meaning in fellowship with each other. The trouble is that one of the most natural and powerful ways of creating community is creating walls. By clarifying boundaries, we know who is in and who is out. We ensure that we are in by being confident of who is out. And those of us who have felt like outsiders before can sometimes be the most vigilant about protecting those clearcut lines.

The truth is - we are so afraid of being outside. The fear of being out is not just who or what is outside. The terror is not being included inside, because community is one of the greatest experiences we can know—there we taste the love, joy, and freedom for which we were created.

In Ephesians, we, the Gentiles being spoken to, are reminded, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." We are told to remember that we once were strangers. This is the same thing Jews remember at Passover "It was we who were strangers in Egypt." Fundamental to our identity, we are to remember that we all were once strangers - those who were outside, isolated, away from the fellowship we were created for. And while we often remember that 'love your neighbor' is commanded at a few key places in Scripture, 'love the stranger' is commanded no less than 36 times.

We are to love those who we cannot imagine could be in fellowship with God. Because this is the story of God all through Scripture - every time we, the religious ones, believe that someone is outside of the love and fellowship of God, we are shown to be wrong. God's love is ever expanding, tearing down walls and barriers between us because God is saving every one of us, and that salvation is bigger than all of us - it involves us all together. This is the dream of God - one new humanity, all brought together in Christ. This dream of God is what we as the church are called to live out here and now. We are to be a glimpse of the kingdom of God, the dream of God, here on earth.

You could pass me off as being young and idealistic, but I have no conception that this is easy or a sentimental, feel-good unity. Just as any relationship takes work, a body where we all live together despite our deeply different ways of life is the hardest work we can take on. Our lives have been lead in different ways on each side of our walls, and we must learn to live together. It will take listening and changing and being open to seeing God in those we thought were without God in this world. It will mean being honest about our fears and our privilege and our shame. And we will struggle, and we will fail, and then we will return to this table and Christ, the resurrected one among us, will be our peace.

Because Christ is our peace. In his flesh that we share here, he has broken down the dividing wall and is making one humanity out of us.

And that is why I believe in this dream of God - not out of some naive optimism, but because God is among us. God who brings together Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, Catholics and Protestants, blacks and whites, gay and straight, men and women, rich and poor. I believe because this has always been the way of the church - never easy, never simple, but full of the grace and power of God at work within us, bringing us together despite whatever separates us. Whenever and wherever we believed we were without hope, God is always there among us, doing immeasurably more than we ask or imagine.

What I believe more than anything is that this dream is worth it. It's what wakes me up in the morning. It's what drives me. It's what brought me back to the church when I wanted to leave. And there are still days when I doubt, when I struggle, when I am absolutely sure we all must be crazy. But every time, I remember that there is nothing out there that I would rather be part of, nothing I would rather give my life to. It is a task worth failing at, a dream worth dying for. And only because of that, it is a dream worth living in. The only one there is.

We join in that dream here today. We are here to take the body and blood of Christ, the flesh of the one who has made peace among us. And we cannot stop here. We must carry it out into the world as the new humanity God is creating among us, breaking down walls, reaching across barriers, joining with those we never imagined, as we are built together, as Ephesians says, into a dwelling place for God.