

Sermon Draft

Text: Ephesians 2:11–22

Sermon: The Walls that Divide Us

“The Church’s One Foundation,” and that foundation of course is Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd. A solid and sure foundation that the church is built upon. Once a foundation is laid the walls are put up, otherwise you just have a slab. But some walls we learn need to be removed.

Christ came to build us into a temple and to tear down the walls that separate us. Paul reminds the early Christians of the walls that separated them as Gentiles. The good news is that Christ can and does demolish the walls that separate us. Christ builds up and tares down to make us one.

What Paul calls the dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Long before you or I took our first breath. It happened when Jesus died. Every Sunday we rejoice that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins. Every Sunday we rejoice that his resurrection opened the gates of heaven to all believers. We are delighted to receive every single gift that his death and resurrection can bestow upon us.

“Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (vs 13–14).

Unfortunately, the Church has not always gratefully received the fruit of Christ’s death Paul speaks of this morning a broken-down wall. Maybe it’s because when that wall fell, the onrush of Gentile Christians crowded out the Jewish Christians so that we’re hard-pressed to identify with the hostility of which he speaks. We’ve never experienced being treated like second-class citizens in the kingdom by those who identified themselves as “the chosen people” and were proud of it! Maybe it’s because our men were never told they had to be circumcised before they could join the ranks of the saved. Maybe it’s because we were never told that we had to abstain from pork, shrimp, or lobster if we wanted to be first-class citizens of the kingdom. Maybe it’s because we were never told that we had to sever our ties with unbelieving Gentile friends and family lest they contaminate us. In our experience, we’ve never been excluded from citizenship, never been considered foreigners to the covenants of promise.

Whatever the reason, there's never been a time when we haven't had access to God through the Spirit. The wall Christ demolished we never saw standing! For that, we can be grateful! But sometimes we take what we have for granted.

Let me ask you this—what happens to a city when an invader knocks down the wall that protects the citizens inside and the invaders take over that city? Do they leave the wall in ruins? No! They immediately rebuild it so that they can have security from a future invader!

Which brings me to the problem that we face. Paul says that Jesus knocked down that wall of hostility! That wall consisted of various identity markers that separated Jew from non-Jew, all the dietary and hygiene-related laws that gave Jews their own unique identity. If Jesus destroyed that wall of separation and made out of the two groups an entirely new thing, a human temple, a unified residence for the Holy Spirit why has the Church set about rebuilding that wall? Why have Christians established new identity markers for themselves that have re-created feelings of hostility? Why has the Church rebuilt an “us versus them” mentality?

I think the answer is fear. We drag the fears that society creates right into the church. We come through its doors carrying those fears with us. A certain congregation feared the changing neighborhood around them. They wouldn't even allow a second service in the language of the neighbors because they feared they would eventually outnumber them and "take over" the church.

Oh, and it's not just a wall based on ethnic origin. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked that the most segregated hour happens at 11 a.m. on a Sunday morning. But it's not just a "separate but equal" separation based on skin color. It's also a wall based on generational differences. Does paying a lot of attention to Millennials because we desperately want them in our church mean that we don't welcome older generations? What about the wall that exists where the community views a certain church as "the church for the rich people," and what if those people act like it too? And what about the church whose preaching clearly says that it welcomes Republicans but not Democrats, or vice versa? You see, fear is not the only motive for rebuilding the wall; a desire to be surrounded by like-minded people is also at work. Unity on various topics of the day brings security.

And while each brings his or her bricks and mortar to the party, while each interest group stirs the cement mixer and trowels it on thick, Paul's words sound very uncomfortable. Where does one find genuine relief from fear? Where does one find true security and unanimity? You're headed in the wrong direction if you think a wall is the key! You're going about this the wrong way!

Christ is our peace! His apostles and prophets are the foundation, not for the wall, but for the holy temple that God's people are meant to be.

How can the Church address this problem? Society shames people into change. Society enacts laws to bring conformity. In the Church, however, it begins with repentance. It begins with confessing that God is not pleased when we try to replace a wall that his Son demolished with another. It means confessing that when we have been wall builders, or when we have been complicit in such wall building with our silence, we have sinned. Christ is our peace. To him, we go for healing and forgiveness. To him, we go for spiritual renewal. If his death meant the demolition of such walls, what does his life mean, if not the power and strength to make a new start?

Later in his letter, Paul will urge his readers to be *“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (4:3). What does that mean? Well, it doesn't mean that we try to eradicate difference of skin color, ethnicity, economic diversity, or political thought. It doesn't mean that we only try to get along better. But it means that one subjects all of those differences to Christ. If such differences do not matter to him, why should they matter to his people?

So as Paul says in Romans, *“Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you”* (15:7). Just as Jesus welcomed you into his family in Baptism, forgiving your sins, giving you peace, promising you eternal life in his name, so has he welcomed every other person who believes in him. He didn't say no to those who have or don't have tattoos; he didn't say no to those who drive or don't drive a Mercedes. He didn't reject or welcome only Germans, African Americans, or those from South America. What he does want us to do is repent by no longer making those things of first importance. What he does want is that we stop making those things matters of pride or privilege.

In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul sets our aim clearly: *“that in everything [Christ] might be preeminent”* (Colossians 1:18). Find our security and unity in him!

In June of 1987, when he visited Berlin, President Reagan challenged the leader of the Soviet Union, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” Spray-painted on that same wall were these words: “This wall will fall. Beliefs become reality.” Eventually that wall came down. Will belief eventually become reality for the churches too? The Spirit is still at work changing hearts. Jesus still forgives and empowers. John’s vision of a multitude no one could number from all tribes, languages, and races still stands. In our day, may belief become reality once again and walls of division come tumbling down!

Amen