

**Sermon 7/22/18:
9th Sunday after Pentecost; Jer. 23:1-6, Eph. 2:11-22, Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56**

Our second reading today comes from the letter to the Ephesians; a community which was predominantly Gentile converts to Christianity. Once outsiders, becoming insiders. They were not from a Jewish lineage, and yet, they were switching camps of belief from Roman paganism and nationalism to believing in a Jewish rabbi crucified on a Roman cross.

I'll be honest with you all, this text really has troubled me this week. I've prayed over it probably more than most sermons this year. There are trigger words in the text for me- maybe there are for you too. Words and phrases like, "having no hope, both groups made into one, dividing wall, hostility between us, one new humanity, no longer strangers, proclaiming peace to you." There is too much here for just one sermon. So where does one go with all these phrases?

One of those questions I always ask at Theology Pub, beyond what is triggered in you in a particular reading, is- what does it have to do with today's world? How does this have anything to do with my daily living? What do words that are nearly 2000 years old, have anything to do with me today? The answer surprisingly is always yes, there is something here which pertains to my world today- to our world.

It was November 9, 1989. My world history teacher, Mr. Cain, walked into class and asked us: what is the purpose and history of walls? I'll never forget that day. He proceeded to give us a general run down of the usage of wall-like structures through the course of humanity. Ranging from first tribes building thorn-like structure around their night-time camp fires to keep out lions and predators, to brick and mortar walls like the wall of China to keep out warring enemies. He proceeded to tell us that walls were predominately used as pre-emptive measures rather than responsive to an attack. It was built out of fear of the unknown stranger or possible threat. Walls were built he said to make sure those who were inside, stayed inside (for safety or control), and those outside the walls, were kept outside (for safety or control).

There have been walls built throughout history: the walls of Jericho, Hadrian's Roman wall, the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, the Korean DMZ zone wall barrier, the Jerusalem West Bank barrier wall, and the latest – the Hungarian border wall which was built just a couple of years ago to keep out fleeing refugees. Then, there's our American southern border wall which grows daily in its fortitude.

Walls. Dividing walls. Walls built primarily on fear and hostility between groups of people. Once a wall is built, it sometimes never comes down, and if it does, it takes years. That November in 1989 in high school, I remember watching in tears, as families were reunited after decades apart. They had survived a horrific war and a wall built within their own city. But the day the Berlin wall came down, hostilities were forgotten, and peace and reconciliation were the new foundation. I'll never forget that year when the demolition began. It was the same year Tiananmen Square took place, as people who were oppressed under communism, gave voice to their unrest. The physical wall in Berlin and the imposed walls of control in China. Both built out of hostility.

Ephesians speaks directly to the hostilities which WE have built amongst ourselves. Sometimes these are physical walls which exclude others, sometimes these are figurative walls of exclusion and control. We are still building walls today- so yes...this text is still VERY relevant for us today I think. And maybe that's why it was so hard to prepare to preach. It is easy to point the finger at the physical walls being built which we see as harmful. Walls which separate families and prohibit those seeking safety. Physical walls which isolate information and growth of peoples, so that they become restricted because of leader's fears of an identity beyond their own nation. Walls which dig deep into soil and make a claim of property. Walls built to keep others out, or to keep limitations on those within.

But there are other walls in humanity too. Ephesians speaks directly to these types of walls as well. Systemic walls and barriers which separate and prohibit, isolate and restrict. When we place barriers of who is included and excluded by race, gender, theology, education, or citizenship. Barriers set by anger or hurt, fear or ignorance placing two groups against each other. And it truly does come down to two groups usually – those who are in, and those who are out. Inclusion vs. exclusion.

The history of the church has done its fair share of harm with barriers too. Who is welcome at the Lord's table and who is not, who can be baptized and at what age, who can marry and who cannot, who can preside and who is unworthy. Humanity as a whole continues to harm each other through our hostilities towards each other. Jesus knew this all too well living in a time of Roman domination. So did Paul when writing to the Ephesians. The Ephesians- the predominantly Roman citizens who were becoming followers of Christ. Followers of the Jewish tradition of a Messiah. They were not part of the fold – not part of the chosen people, not part of the insiders club. They were gentiles- pagans for the most part. Oddly enough, the citizens of Ephesus knew about walls too- and exclusion. They lived within a huge renowned wall around their city. They were the capital of Asia Minor – the largest city second to only Rome itself! Walls – they knew all about dividing walls and being on the inside...and the unfortunate harshness of being on the outside too. They had prior leaders who had massacred all the Roman citizens in the provinces. They knew all too well what it meant to be on the wrong side of the dividing wall- or be on the right side depending on who was ruling at the time. I wonder if Paul used this trigger phrase of "dividing wall" when writing to the Ephesians, because he knew they'd get it; it would hit close to home. Maybe it does for you too today as it does for me?

But here is where I'll end my long history lesson on walls.

Because, you see, Christ unites us into one humanity which no wall can divide. The world may build walls. Systems may impose barriers. But we, as a new humanity in Christ- we are not bound by any of them. Christ's message of love and forgiveness in the face of differences is non-negotiable.

God's children are everywhere – inside and outside of walls. Even the ones we hate, fear and blame – all are God's children. We are all one in Christ, not because we worship Christ (or we don't), not because we follow Christ (or we don't). We are one in Christ because Christ has made us one. We are one in Christ because Christ conquered all walls, even the barrier of death. We are one body in Christ,

sharing one cup, and one bread. We are one in baptism. We are one new humanity in Christ, not divided by this world's barriers any longer.

The universal body of Christ is something I personally ache for to be seen and lived. We are all one body. I believe this to my very core. It doesn't matter your denomination, faith, citizenship or whatever dividing factor there might be placed for exclusion by the systems and powers that may be. Christ has redeemed all humanity into one. Period. Every table everywhere this day is Christ's and ALL should be welcome. Now I know this is not the case. And this is where I ache. I ache for my brothers and sisters throughout the world to know that I see them and welcome them, even if dogma and theological walls are in place. I ache for a new humanity which breaks down walls of exclusion from the Table to the places of basic care and protection. I ache for our new humanity to take voice and action to crumble the imposed dividing walls ... and to even see the walls we have accepted as tolerable, when they are far from acceptable.

Differences among persons exist, but community is possible when dividing walls based on hostility are broken down. The bonds of humanity tie us together for the good of all. What was seen as different or separate, Christ has united into one new humanity, meant to be without hostility. By Jesus' death on a Roman cross, the idea of weakness becomes strength, those who were once outsiders, are now made one, and there is no longer insiders and outsiders.....everything is abolished – everything which has been formed to separate us, has been eliminated by Christ. Sin has no power to divide anymore, unless we let it.

It is my prayer, that whatever dividing walls you have in your life, you can begin to reconcile those hostilities within and without. Whatever systemic dividing walls we are all apart of in the world, may we remember our one humanity and shout our voices and lives louder to crumble those imposed walls. For our benefit of privilege of systems which secure insider distinction, only suffers our brothers and sisters in our one humanity. Break down your walls and all walls. Remember, we are one humanity in Christ. All are God's children. ALL. Amen.