

Sermon for July 22, 2018  
"The Body of Christ: Abolishing the waLs"

Ephesians 2:11-22

Walls: they are built for many reasons. Mostly they are built for protection. The walls around ancient cities kept out invaders. Dikes keep the sea from flooding valuable farm land. The walls of our homes protect us from the elements. The walls of the prison keep dangerous people from roaming the streets.

Walls are useful, but they can be used for sinful purposes. Walls can embody our hatreds and give them form. In Europe, Christians hated Jews, so they sent them to one part of the city, the part they called the ghetto and built walls around it. When the eastern and western superpowers couldn't agree on how to work together, a wall was built that divided one political philosophy from another. When the youth of one neighborhood decide they can't mix with the youth of another neighborhood, they stake out their turf and construct borders. Walls can also be used to create more hatred. The ghetto walls in Europe made it possible for the so-called Christians to kill Jews because they didn't have to live with them. The Berlin Wall didn't bring peace between east and west. It was just another source of conflict. Barriers between neighborhoods only succeed in creating an anonymity that makes hating all the more easy.

Walls can be dangerous, because often times they become bigger than the people who built them. It's harder to tear down a wall than it is to build it. Walls are more than bricks and concrete. They are mental and emotional attitudes put in concrete. They can be prejudices and hatreds in material form. Sure, the Berlin wall was torn down rather easily by the citizens of Germany, but the inequalities forged by the iron curtain are harder to overcome.

Walls are useful, and dangerous.

Our Scripture passage today talks about a dividing wall. (vs. 14) It is the one meant to divide and protect God's people from the world. God created this barrier to protect Israel and to keep it holy. It was the wall of laws that defined who was part of God's people and who wasn't. The main symbol of this boundary between the people of God and those outside was circumcision. God's people were circumcised and those outside were not. The wall created by circumcision and the Law was meant to set God's people apart from other peoples. This dividing wall was meant to serve as a sign to the peoples. God's Law showed the world what was holy and what wasn't. It also showed the peoples of the world their need for God.

This boundary between the Godly and the ungodly was a gift from God, but people often use God's gifts in un-Godly ways. Ideally anyone who wanted to serve God could have become an Israelite, one of God's people. But the people of Israel used the laws as a way of keeping people out. A barrier that was meant to show people they needed to change became a barrier that prevented change. The children of Israel should have realized that they were only the chosen people because of God's graciousness, and not through any merit of their own. Instead they looked down on the nations and thought themselves better because they were chosen. The wall between Gentile and Jew became a means of elitism and prejudice toward the Gentiles.

The boundary between the Jews and the Gentiles was created to show people their need for God. But Israel had taken it and used it keep people from coming to God. God built it as a sign of love, but people used it to foster prejudice and hatred.

The Good News is that Jesus came to break down the old barriers. First, he came to break down the barriers that separated people from God. He broke down the barriers that the Israelites of his day had misused. Through Christ all could come to God, both Jew and Gentile. Christ broke

down the barrier of sin that separated us from God's holiness. It's no accident that at Christ's death the veil in the temple was rent in two. Through Christ's death and resurrection, he broke down the wall that separated us from eternal life. He made it possible for all to become part of God's people through his cleansing blood.

Jesus also broke down the barriers that separated people from one another. He broke down the barriers that separated the Gentiles from the Jews. The law was a holy thing when God gave it to the Israelites. But they had profaned it. So Jesus abolished it. (vs. 15)

Jesus abolished the law, and wall it had created. The title of this sermon is not a misprint. It is meant to be a play on words. When Jesus abolished the Laws, he also abolished the Walls of separation. Then Jesus put himself in place of the Law. He became the only standard for establishing who were God's people, and who weren't. No longer was nationality or language or race a standard for God's people. Jesus, his life and death, his identity as the son of God, became the only boundary that mattered. In Jesus we were made one, the Body of Christ.

For the Ephesians this meant a lot. They had been separated from God. The Jews shunned them because they were uncircumcised. They were not allowed to worship God in the temple. They were separated from the worship, activities and guidance of God's people.

But Jesus changed all that. He made a new way for them to be part of God's people. Jesus redefined God's people so that the Ephesians could get in. The boundary that defined God's people ceased to be the Law. It became the cleansing blood of Christ applied to the sinful soul. They were once far off, separated from God. But in Christ they were brought to God.

This new definition of God's people destroyed all the old ones. No longer did the terms Jew and Gentile matter in God's Kingdom. In the church it didn't matter where, when, or to whom you were born. The prejudice and anger between the Jews and Gentiles was forgiven. They were now a new "People of God." They were the Body of Christ!

In Christ God broke down those barriers back in Bible times, and God is still breaking down those barriers today. Through Christ God is breaking down the wall of sin and pain that imprisons us. Like the Ephesians we were once separated from God by our sinfulness. But Christ shed his blood so that we could receive salvation and all God's blessings. All we need to do is put our faith in Christ and we will be saved and united with our Heavenly Father.

Christ is also breaking down the walls that separate us from one another. The differences between people are meant to be blessings, gifts from God. Like the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, our differences of race and language and culture are meant to enrich our lives. They are not meant as barriers to separate us, but people often used differences as barriers to separate, and these barriers create hatred. This is even true in the church. Our barriers create hatred between people even in Christ's church: between Protestants and Catholics, between East and West, between Liberals and Conservatives, between Charismatics and Fundamentalists, between contemporary and traditional.

People are always at work building new walls, but in the Kingdom of God, only one wall matters and that is Christ Jesus. It's his death and resurrection: that reconciles us with God in the Body of Christ. All who believe on him and trust in him are one in him, but the human made walls that separate us are not easy to tear down. If they were mere brick, we could do it. But they are spiritual and emotional walls of hatred and prejudice. Only the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit, which transforms us, can destroy them. Let Jesus break down the walls of sin that separate you from God's grace, and the walls of hatred that separate you from your brothers and sisters.