

When I was in college, one semester my roommate and I spent a lot of time listening to Pink Floyd's album, "The Wall." For those of you who don't know it, it's a sort of a psychedelic rock opera or concept album, telling the story of a musician's childhood, adolescence and young adulthood and his increasing psycho-social isolation behind a metaphorical wall of his own and society's building. It may be the most depressing rock album every made. We loved it. We wallowed in the misery of the lyrics, which we claimed as our own. Oh, we had some valid reasons to be unhappy, mind you, having both recently suffered the death of a parent and painful, unexpected break-ups with our high school sweethearts. Just being students at Rice University was no picnic. In those days, Rice always ranked near the top in student suicides. And, in fact, my roommate had been battling clinical depression since he was 12. But as so many bright young college students are, we were terribly serious about life; we were artists and we thought that made our suffering all the more real and valuable. We were building our own walls against what we saw as the great pain of life and to separate ourselves from the common herd. We were in love with our walls.

The great American poet, Robert Frost once wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," but he wasn't referring to human nature. We human beings do seem to love our walls. We seem obsessed with ways of dividing things and people, us from them, mine from yours. Just think of all the walls that dominate our history and our news. As a child in England, I learned about Hadrian's Wall, built by the Romans to keep the Picts of what is now Scotland out of the Roman province of Britannia. It didn't work. As the Romans got distracted with issues closer to home and withdrew their troops, the Picts found the wall to be very little hindrance. Most of us know of the Great Wall of China, built to protect the Empire from marauding tribes to the north. Ultimately, it didn't work either and China had a whole dynasty of Manchu rulers from the north. Within the memory of all the adults in the room, there was the Berlin Wall, a reinforced concrete incarnation of the metaphorical Iron Curtain that separated the Communist Warsaw Pact from capitalist Europe. As I think we all remember, that wall didn't work either. Now the Israelis are building walls to keep the Palestinians in their place and there's a drive afoot to build walls along the U.S. border with Mexico. Anybody want to put money on how effective those efforts will be over time?

The walls that human beings build to separate themselves don't always take form in brick and stone, concrete and steel. Walls of exclusion can be erected with words, attitudes, policies and procedures. In the words of Rudyard Kipling, "East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet." The great Tennessee orator Fred Craddock, recognized by Newsweek as one of America's top preachers, tells the story of the café in his hometown that used to have a curtain dividing the front of the establishment from the back, that is, the white section, accessible by the front door, from the colored section, which black folks entered by the alley. That simple fabric barrier would have been easy to breach but in its way it was far more effective than a wall of bricks because of the attitudes of segregation that had been so deeply ingrained in folks on both sides of the curtain. We are forever drawing metaphorical lines that separate us one from the other. In a recently published sermon, Mickey Anders, pastor of First Christian Church in Pikeville, Kentucky, recalls his own pastor, Don Harbuck, talking about "a velvet covered wall which separates those of us who are affluent and wealthy from the people who do not have it and never will have it. Then there is the sheepskin wall which raises hostility between the educated and the uneducated."

This same perverse desire to push away anyone who is at all different, to erect walls of division, has afflicted people even in the very act of worshipping the Creator of us all. There was, in the Temple in Jerusalem, a balustrade separating the outermost section, the Court of the Gentiles, from the rest of the Temple, where only Jews were permitted. In 1871 one of its pillars was unearthed and on it was this warning: "No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for the death which follows." Some of you may recall from our Sunday School study of Acts this spring just how seriously this was taken as Paul was nearly stoned to death when someone spread the rumor that he'd brought a gentile past the dividing line. There were other dividers in the Temple, too, making sure that everyone was kept where they belonged. In his commentary on this passage, the Baptist scholar Walter Shurden points out that there was a wall that separated Jewish women from Jewish men, another that separated the laity from the priests, and finally one that "separated the holy things of God from the common things of life," the sacred from the secular. On the one hand, these separations were meant to honor God. On the other hand, those walls bore the message, "This is special. We are special. You, you're not quite so special." Even the Law of Moses itself was a dividing line that alienated some as much as it allowed others to show their devotion to Yahweh. Andrew T. Lincoln writes in his commentary on Ephesians, "Torah itself could be seen as providing a fence around Israel... It can easily be seen that in functioning as a fence to protect Israel from the impurity of the Gentiles, the law became such a sign of Jewish particularism that it also alienated Gentiles and became a cause of hostility."

In some churches, that sense of particularism continues to this day. I've not found this to be a problem at Good Shepherd, for which I am grateful to you and to God, but in some churches, long-time members can make it difficult for newcomers to feel as if they truly belong. Some churches are dominated by cliques and tight-knit clans who resist mingling with those outside their accustomed circle. Some churches are divided between those who attend the hip, contemporary service and those old fogies who still like to sing out of the hymnbook. Sometimes, regular attendees look down on those who can't make it every Sunday, or those who come to Sunday School feel superior to those who don't. We Christians are not immune to the wall-building instinct and we must constantly be on our guard against it, even in such simple matters as making sure that we include everyone in invitations to church events and remembering not to assume that "everyone" knows how "we do things" because "that's how we've always done it."

Just in case we are ever tempted to fall into that pattern of thinking of ourselves as a privileged elite over against the scruffy rabble, Paul reminds us in Ephesians that we, too, were once the outsiders. Our scripture this morning begins with these words in J.B. Phillips' translation: "Do not lose sight of the fact that you were born "Gentiles", known by those whose bodies were circumcised as "the uncircumcised". You were without Christ, you were utter strangers to God's chosen community, the Jews, and you had no knowledge of, or right to, the promised agreements. You had nothing to look forward to and no God to whom you could turn. But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off are brought near through the shedding of Christ's blood." In his use of the terms "far off" and "near," Paul is recalling the language of Isaiah who phrased God's promise for the future this way (Isaiah 57:18-19): "I have seen his ways and healed him; I have comforted him, giving him true comfort; peace without measure to those who

are far off and those who are near. The Lord said, 'I will heal them.'" This language would have had deep meaning in the Ephesian church, where many of the followers of Jesus' way would likely have been converts to Judaism, proselytes, before they heard of Christ. The word proselyte, you see, comes from the Greek word meaning "to approach, to come near." We, too, have been brought near to God through Christ, saved by grace through faith and that, as Paul reminds us earlier in chapter 2 of Ephesians, not of ourselves, lest anyone should boast. When we remember that we began as aliens, outsiders to God's will, and that we regularly step outside of God's will for our lives only to be brought back and forgiven through mercies that come every morning, when we remember that, it is much easier to be humble about our own place in the world, much harder to be ready to build walls because, after all, what is the difference between us and anyone else in God's sight?

Here's Eugene Peterson's rendition of verse 14 of our passage in "The Message": "The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody." What wonderful good news! We are no longer hemmed in behind our walls, from each other or from God. In Jesus, we have gained freedom from those categories. Our differences are washed away in his blood. We are not condemned to that age-old strife between clans, whatever they may be: Jew versus Gentile, Anglo versus Hispanic, White versus Black, Democrat versus Republican, Baptist versus Catholic, Mariners fan versus Twins fan. We are free from all of these little human-made differences to be one new family in God's love, which extends to all of God's creation. Through Christ, we find the fulfillment of the plan Paul outlined in chapter one, verse 10, "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Through Christ, all of us are able to join in the berakah: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Through Jesus, our walls are torn down. Of course, it's human nature once something is torn down to build something else in its place. Often, we use the same materials to build the new structure that were a part of the old structure. I was among the spectators on Beacon Hill that day in 2000 when the Kingdome was imploded to make way for the Seahawks new Qwest Field. When I heard that mighty roar and saw the immense cloud of concrete dust that spread across the city, I would have guessed that there wasn't enough useful material left to build a chicken coop. But of the estimated 95% of the Kingdome material that was recycled, one-third was slated to be reused in some way in building Qwest Field. Now, we are not to use the debris from our torn down walls to construct our new lives in the Beloved Community of God. Jesus said you can't put new wine in old wineskins. As the power of Christ in our lives demolishes the walls between us and our fellow humans, between us and God, we must be careful to discard the rubble, not to hang on to little bits and pieces of the brokenness that divided us from our neighbors and our Creator. It may be easy and convenient to try to build our lives using the remnants of old assumptions, old prejudices, but if we do we will soon find that we are only rebuilding the same old walls.

Instead, Paul says, we are to build an entirely new structure, a temple consecrated to the Lord, a dwelling place for God. Once again, Paul sees the fulfillment of a much earlier prophecy, as Zechariah said, “Those who are far off shall come and help to build the temple of the LORD”. Not only are those who are far off, scattered Jews and Gentiles united in the new Kingdom of God, coming together to build the Temple, they ARE the Temple. The followers of Jesus are the structure “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” We have, in the words of the grand old hymn, a firm foundation for our lives in Christ in the word of God given to the apostles and the prophets and come down to us today in the Bible. In the words of the apostles and prophets, we read the promises of God to be with us and to help us in all joy and trouble alike. We are never, ever forsaken by our loving God. And, as another wonderful and familiar old hymn says, this church that has its foundation in Jesus Christ our Lord, is “called forth from every nation, yet one o’er all the earth.” As Phillips writes in his translation of verse 21, “In Him, each separate piece of building, properly fitting into its neighbour, grows together into a temple consecrated to the Lord.” The walls of nationalism, of racism, of any kind of particularism, are broken down and all the rubble discarded.

As always, there is underlying this reiteration of the Good News of release, a charge for us. We, the church, built on the foundation of those who went before us serving God and with Christ Jesus as our keystone, are now the Body of Christ on earth and for our neighbors. As Jesus, through his life and death and resurrection, tore down and keeps tearing down the walls that separate humankind from each other and from God, so must we become wall demolishers and peacemakers, helping to bring together those whom human sin and brokenness have held apart. Dr. Robert C. Linthicum is a Presbyterian minister who has founded a ministry called Partners in Urban Transformation. In his commentary on this passage, he claims that “Paul is arguing that by the very nature of its mission, the church is the most radical force in the world, because it is about the most fundamental reconstruction of society into the world as God has always intended it to be.” Linthicum writes that “What (Paul) is contending is that what any political, economic, educational, social or religious system will always seek to do (including both Rome and Judaism) is to divide humanity into “us” and “them” – with “us” always being the “good guys” and “them” always being the very epitome of evil.” They do so, Linthicum says, “because, by getting the public to identify those others unlike themselves as the enemy, the people’s energy will be diverted from discerning the ways the systems use power to secure themselves and instead be transferred to fighting whoever has been identified as the enemy. This, in turn, would allow the system to solidify its power and its control over the people.” But, Linthicum continues, the Good News about which Paul writes to the Ephesians is that “God has abolished the power of the systems and their capacity to separate people into warring factions.” Those dividing walls between us, Linthicum writes, “have now been exposed as a lie, and we discover that we are in reality one new people – disciples of Jesus Christ!”

It is a proud part of our Baptist heritage that we are a people who work at tearing down walls. Roger Williams, one of the organizers of the first Baptist church in America, was an advocate both for religious freedom in the New World and for respect for the Native Americans. An English Baptist, William Carey, is widely known as “the father of modern missions,” breaking down walls of prejudice and complacency to take the Good News to those who were far off, in India and Burma. Walls of gender discrimination have been slowly dissolved through the efforts

of women like Helen Barrett Montgomery, minister, social activist, Biblical translator and the first woman president of the old Northern Baptist Convention. And in the 1960s, white American Baptist clergy and laypeople marched alongside their black sisters and brothers for civil rights under the leadership of that great Baptist preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., singing, "We shall overcome! We shall overcome! We shall overcome someday." The walls in our society today are just as destructive to the human spirit, whether they are built of concrete and steel, of velvet and sheepskin, or of prejudice and hatred. We who were once aliens now have the joyful responsibility to take this message to the world: that Christ Jesus has broken down all the walls, that we are at peace with God, and that we can live in peace, in shalom with all of our sisters and brothers, our neighbors, whoever and wherever they are. Thanks be to God!