

Still Tearing Down Walls

I thought it was so appropriate that this particular passage would show up in the lectionary for today. As a friend of mine back at A.D. Players in Houston used to say, “That is so cool of God!” For those of you who may have missed it, some of us attended or participated in an event yesterday that was very much in the spirit of this passage. By its very existence and structure, our Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches witnesses to the truth about which Paul wrote to the Ephesians. Christ “is our peace; in his flesh he has made (widely divergent) groups into one (body) and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Yesterday, I was honored to participate as a cook in a barbecue fundraiser sponsored by the Black Caucus of the Evergreen Association. I held hands and prayed with men whom my grandparents would have dismissed with an epithet all too common in the South of my youth, worked alongside and laughed with people who may not have been welcome and certainly would not have been comfortable in the homes of many of my family in days not too far gone by, simply because our skins have a different tone and our hair a different texture. As I served up food, I looked at the happily chatting crowd and saw not only the combination of Blacks and Whites but also those odd partners in our Asian Caucus, Filipino- and Japanese-Americans, whose traditional enmity is perhaps even more deeply entrenched than that of Whites and Blacks in America. I looked at that group, enjoying each others’ company and I thought of another friend from my seminary days in Louisville who used to say of the multi-racial congregation where he played the organ, “Man, that’s what heaven is going to look like!”

Of course, the very fact that yesterday’s event moved me so deeply also reminds me that as a society, even as the Body of Christ, we’ve got a long way to go. If we were truly living in a “post-racial” society, as some pundits cheerfully proclaimed after the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, then gatherings like yesterday’s would be commonplace. We wouldn’t even notice them or any other coming together of people whom we still automatically categorize as belonging to one group or another. The fact of the matter is, we’re still working on making a reality of Paul’s vision of the broken-down dividing wall. We’re still tearing down walls, with the help of the Holy Spirit, but for some it is a terrifying exercise.

When we looked at this passage in Ephesians three years ago, I mentioned how, 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 climax of the album comes when a judge sentences the protagonist to having his protective walls torn away, leaving him at the mercy of his sadistic school teacher, his controlling mother and his rabid fans. “Tear down the wall,” comes the judge’s frenzied cry and

Still Tearing Down Walls

it is echoed by a martial sounding chorus, accompanied by the sound of marching jackboots. One easily catches the terror of the situation for the main character, who cannot imagine life without his protective walls. It's an extreme message crafted by extreme people, but the truth of it may resonate with all of us. One of the great temptations in life, I think, is to fall in love with the walls that divide us in different ways from others.

When the great American poet, Robert Frost wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," I don't think he was referring to human nature. The lines that follow that opener seem to be referring to Nature itself or perhaps something beyond: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, /That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, /And spills the upper boulders in the sun; /And makes gaps even two can pass abreast." Is it the Spirit of God that sends that frozen-ground-swell to separate the blocks that humans have erected or perhaps the Earth itself, "groaning," as Paul writes to the Romans, "in labor pains," waiting to be set free from the bondage and decay of the Fall? Frost's narrator works alongside his neighbor to rebuild the wall between them despite his misgivings but the neighbor has no such qualms: "He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors." ... He will not go behind his father's saying, /And he likes having thought of it so well /He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."" 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 walls are being built 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 our hymn a few minutes ago, we agreed that "In Christ there is no east or west," but I suspect more of the world agrees with the words of Rudyard Kipling: "East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet." Fred Craddock, a native Tennessean 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. Don Harbuck, another Southern preacher taking a hard look at society through the prism of this passage, offers for consideration "a velvet covered wall which separates those of us who are affluent and wealthy from the people who do not have it and never

Still Tearing Down Walls

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.” We can read in the Book of Acts 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.”

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. “Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth... 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” 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: “peace without measure to those who are far off and those who are near.” 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?

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

Still Tearing Down Walls

day in 2000 when the Kingdome was imploded to make way for 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 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." 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 we sang earlier, this church that has its foundation in Jesus Christ our Lord, is "one community of love throughout the whole wide earth." As J. B. 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. In his commentary on this passage, Robert Linthicum 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

Still Tearing Down Walls

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!”

That event yesterday and its unspoken mission of continuing to break down the dividing walls between followers of Christ in our region fits well with some of the more positive aspects of our shared Baptist heritage. At our best, 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. 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!