

July 18, 2021
Ephesians 2:11-22

Pentecost 8
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Then and Now”

“So that you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God ...”

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

I gained a new appreciation for Robert Frost’s iconic poem *Mending Wall* when I began my first year of university in southeastern Pennsylvania. Growing up in the congested suburbs of metropolitan New York, I was immediately struck by the lush green hills and farm fields that stretched out as far as the eye could see, a sight that was not common in my home area. But I also noticed that many of these fields were divided by crude stone walls that scarred the otherwise pristine landscape, walls that did not seem to belong in such a beautiful place. I would later learn that these walls are the remnants of dividers that farmers in the 18th Century built to divide their land from their neighbours’. The walls were built from fieldstone that was quarried and carried to the boundaries, where they were stacked without mortar for great distances. A great deal of hard work went into the building of these walls, and while there are better ways to divide farmland today, they have remained standing; but while I was impressed by the work that went into their construction, Frost’s words kept ringing in my ears: *“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”*

Walls are, of course, a part of our everyday lives, and some walls serve a useful purpose. Load-bearing walls are essential in building construction; an overeager home renovator in my hometown accidentally knocked down this wall in his home, which soon caved in upon himself. Our family home was built on a hill, and a retaining wall kept the land upon which our house was built secure. Sea walls are often built to protect coastal dwellings from erosion, and walls around schoolyards and playgrounds keep children safe. But there are some walls that are as intrusive as those walls in the fields around my university; even though some would argue that *“good fences make good neighbours,”* the fact is that they create barriers in places where our Lord never intended such dividers to exist. I will always remember my trip to Germany and the first time I saw the Berlin Wall, which cut through the city and kept families and neighbours apart in a most cruel and unnecessary fashion. The celebration of the wall’s destruction in 1989 was a momentous occasion in history, another sign of the wisdom of Robert Frost’s observation that *“before I built a wall,*

I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense. Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Not all walls and barriers that cause separation are built of stone or concrete; there are social and psychological walls which are invisible but very real. My community was marred by a practice known as "red lining" that separated white and African American communities, so that my town was predominantly white while the community on the other side of the "red line" was mostly African American. We erect walls to keep us apart from people we perceive as different from us; we place walls around our cliques and inside group to keep out those with whom we do not wish to associate. Walls keep rising to separate people based on political views, religious identity, and ethnic heritage. While some might argue that this has always been the reality of human existence, it goes against our understanding of God's good creation in which there were no walls, no barriers, no means of separating people from God or from one another. In the world that was created by "*God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*" it may be said that the one who is our Creator God "*doesn't love a wall.*"

The world of the New Testament was marked by walls that defined and separated people into specific groups, the most prominent being the division between Jews and Gentiles, between the people of Israel and everyone else who was outside of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The walls that divided these two groups were well-established and accepted by people on both sides; people would never dream of entering the community of the other group. But from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus intentionally broke through all these barriers and crossed walls that had kept people apart for generations. He began by reaching out to people who were considered sinners and undesirables, people who may have lived within the community but were shunned and ostracized by others. He scandalizes the leaders of his community when they saw that "*this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them*" (Luke 15:2) and responds to a leper who approaches him with the statement that "*Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean*" by declaring that "*I do choose. Be made clean!*" *Immediately his leprosy was cleansed*" (Matthew 8:2-3), healing the man of both his physical ailment and the social and psychological exile that he had endured. Jesus enters the territory of the Samaritans, another area that was on the other side of the wall of Jesus' people ("*Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans*" – John 4:9) and encounters a woman at the well who was shunned by members of her community, proclaiming the good news that changes both her life and the lives of "*many Samaritans from the city [who] believed in him because of the woman's testimony*" (John 4:39). The mission of the apostles began with Jesus'

commission that *“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). This apostolic witness began with the Jews gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost and extended across barriers and over walls, to the point where Peter finally proclaims that *“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him”* (Acts 10:34-35). The words of a beloved Sunday school song proclaim the fundamental truth of the Christian faith: *“Jesus loves the little children, **all** the little children of the world.”*

The apostle whose mission was centered on bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people who had once been on the other side of the wall is St. Paul, who had been raised in a world where such contact would have been unthinkable. But from the moment of his conversion on the Damascus Road, his calling was clear: *“he is my instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel”* (Acts 9:15). It was Paul who brought the Gospel to nations and peoples far beyond his homeland; his proclamation was that while there were once walls of division that separated people from one another, such barriers have no place in the kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate. The ministry of Paul is the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: *“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”* (Isaiah 43:18-19). As Saul of Tarsus, his life was defined by the walls and barriers that kept him separated from others; as the Apostle Paul, he proclaims that what once separated people no longer has any place in the world that is now defined by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

- “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” – 2 Corinthians 5:16-17.
- “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” – Galatians 3:27-28.
- “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden in Christ.” – Colossians 3:1-3.

Paul's proclamation of our unity in Christ which supersedes all obstacles and barriers that once separated us continues in his letter to the Ephesians, which was probably a "circular letter" that was read in several congregations in the area in and around Ephesus, an important seaport on the west coast of modern-day Turkey. This letter is addressed to a mostly Gentile audience, people Paul invites to remember their former circumstances that were radically transformed when they were incorporated into the Church which is the Body of Christ:

- "So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' – a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands – remember that you 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." – Ephesians 2:11-12.

Paul directs his audiences' attention back to their former state when they were on the other side of the wall – without Christ, without hope, and "*without God in the world.*" Being "without God" (*atheoi*) refers to a frequent motif in the Bible that Gentiles were ignorant of God ("*Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to being that by nature are not gods.*" – Galatians 4:8). The expression can also be used for someone considered to be "godless" or impious. In the ancient world, referring to a person as "godless" or "without God" was considered a great insult. But that was then, the "former times" or the way it used to be; Paul now directs his readers to the present reality that is theirs in Christ Jesus: "*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*" (2:13). While their world was once defined by the reality of sin, alienation, and hostility between those who belong and those who do not, between residents and aliens, between insiders and outsiders, the good news of the Christian faith is that reconciliation is no longer a dream but something that already exists for those who are in Christ. As at the moment of his death "*the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom*" (Matthew 27:51), in his death and resurrection Christ accomplished God's Will for the reconciliation of all humanity: "*For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and had broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*" (2:14). As it was God's plan "*for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth*" (1:10), now all that has been fulfilled in the one who has broken down all barriers that once separated people from God and people from one another. The "new creation" that results from our baptism into Christ means that our Lord has created "*in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both*

groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” (2:15-16). This unity in Christ is not merely the end of human enmity or hostility; it is the *“peace of God, which passes all understanding, [that] will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:7), the peace with which Christ *“came and proclaimed ... to you who were far off and peace to those who are near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father”* (2:17-18). It is the peace of Christ which our Lord bestows on his followers: *“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives”* (John 14:27). Christ is our peace; the peace and reconciliation that issue from it is a oneness in Christ and a oneness that does not exist apart from him. All those who are not in Christ are called to make peace with one another, *“to be reconciled to one another, just as they have been reconciled to God through Christ’s cross”* (George W. Stroup). The reconciling, boundary-breaking work of God in Christ means that *“you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”* (2:19-20). “Aliens” (*xenoi*) refers to persons who dwell in a place that is not their homeland; in Christ, our home is in the Lord, and in Christ there are no outsiders in the new humanity that is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets who proclaimed the good news that *“once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy”* (1 Peter 2:10). As in Holy Baptism we were reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the Body of Christ, *“built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God”* (2:22), our call as God’s reconciled people is to continue the work of our Lord in being *“ambassadors of reconciliation,”* so that all obstacles, walls, and barriers may no longer keep people separated from God or one another, to continue the work of the one who *“doesn’t love a wall.”*

- “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” – 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

Having been reconciled to God and to each other through Christ’s death and resurrection, the mission of the Church is to continue to proclaim this boundary-

breaking message, to reach across all barriers that once divided us from other people who are holy and precious in the sight of our Lord, and to work to create a body which is unified so that it might witness to the reconciling work of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is easy to fall back on old habits, to revert to our former ways of erecting walls and dividing ourselves from one another; but as the walls that marred the landscape around my university felt out of place in that example of God's good creation, the walls that continue to exist among us have no place in the new creation that is the body of Christ, the house of living stones which is united and strengthened by Christ our cornerstone. The unity for which we strive is not merely for our sake, but for the sake of our witness to the truth of the Gospel, that *"there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."* (Ephesians 4:4-6).

- "It is the unity of the whole Church which makes each member what he is and the fellowship what it is, just as it is Christ and his Body which make the Church what it is ... The Church of Christ is the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit. In this way the life of the Body of Christ becomes our own life. In Christ we no longer live our own lives, but he lives his life in us. The life of the faithful in the Church is indeed the life of Christ in them." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.

Walls may be appropriate in some circumstances, but far too often they are signs of our former selves, of the sin that alienated us from God and dividing us from others. That was then; now as persons baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, our life together is no longer defined by walls, barriers, and other means of identification and separation. Then we were separated from God; now in Christ we are united as children of our heavenly Father. Then we were defined by our differences; now we are defined by our unity in Christ. The walls of the past have no place in our present or future as God's people, for we live in the presence of the one who came to tear down the walls; we live as children of our Lord and Saviour who **doesn't** love a wall!

Amen.