

Perhaps the most famous wall ever built in our generation was the Berlin wall. Constructed on August 13, 1961, the twenty-five-mile-long wall was erected in the heart of the divided city of Berlin, the capital of Germany. It was, in reality, just a small part of a much larger wall called the Iron Curtain. The Berlin wall symbolized the separation of East from West with its menacing ramparts, threatening barbed wire and its steel roots running down into the sewers. It was made up of concrete segments with a height of 11 feet, with a concrete tube on top of it. Behind that there was an illuminated control area called the “death area” because refugees who had reached that area were shot without warning. A trench followed that which prevented vehicles from breaking through, then there was a patrol track, a corridor with watchdogs, watchtowers and bunkers, and then a second wall. At least 100 people were killed at the Berlin Wall. But millions of people rejoiced when that wall came down in 1989.

Another famous wall is the Great Wall of China. It’s more than 2,000 years old, but it remains one of the great wonders of the world. Stretching 4,500 miles, from the mountains of Korea to the Gobi Desert, it was first built to protect an ancient Chinese empire from marauding tribes in the north. Today it’s symbol of Chinese ingenuity and will. The Bible speaks of another famous wall, the wall of Jericho. Joshua marched the people of Israel around that wall seven times, they blew on horns and the wall fell sown. The old spiritual says, “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and the wall come a tumbling down.”

These are perhaps the most famous walls, but there are walls everywhere. Robert Frost wrote an interesting poem entitled “Mending Wall.” In the poem, he described the New England farmer’s job of patching up a rock fence in the spring after the ravages of snow and ice had broken it down during the winter. Together, he and his neighbor, between whose properties the wall ran - patiently put the fence back together stone by stone. Robert Frost was convinced that the wall was unnecessary. He opens the poem by saying, “Something there is that, doesn’t love a wall,.” But his neighbor was of a different mind. He still believed the word that his father had taught him. He ends the poem with that saying: “Good fences make good neighbors.” I am not so sure that line is true, but it is a line that many believe.

The truth is, there are walls everywhere. We all really know that. No one on earth has gone unscathed by the malicious power of walls. Its menacing power moves the length and breadth of human existence. What wall is that? In our text for today the apostle Paul calls it *“the dividing wall of hostility.”* This is the wall that was erected in the hearts of humanity when they rebelled against God and rejected God in the Garden of Eden. This is the wall that separates and fragments and isolates. It is the wall that keeps us apart from God and apart from one another. It is the wall that makes us suspicious and distrustful of each other. It kills fellowship and breeds prejudice and spreads gossip and sets loose the dogs of spiritual war. It takes many forms but it always remains the same wall wherever we encounter it.

*“The dividing wall of hostility”* is within all of us. There is no velvet covered wall which separates us into different categories. We saw that last week in Ephesians 2:1-3 when the apostle Paul wrote: *“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”* Here we read that fallen humanity naturally loves walls. The paradox in all of this is that human beings are basically relational creatures. God created us to have a relationship with Him and to have a relationship with one another. But in reality, oftentimes the way we relate to God and relate to each other is skewed by *“the dividing wall of hostility”* within, over personal issues that make our spiritual life and social life on earth rather chaotic.

The Word of God clearly speaks to us about how to deal the walls in the relationships in our lives. Last week, in Ephesians 2:1-10, the apostle Paul talked about God's transforming grace in our lives, and how he saved us out of the darkness and out of the bondage of our sinfulness and brought us into a position with Jesus in glory. That's the power of the Gospel – which was totally at God's initiative, totally by God's grace. And it is also by the power of God's grace that His transforming work in us prepares us to be actively involved in everything that God is doing. *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”* (Ephesians 2:10). In our text for today, we will also see that same power of God's transforming grace – and we will see how that grace breaks down the dividing wall of our hostilities between God and between each another.

*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated 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

Our text for today is broken down into three main sections. The first section here, verses 11-12, describes the division between Jew and Gentile. Paul tells how the Jews saw the Gentiles as being far off/separated from God/Christ - and aliens and strangers, with an emphasis on being different. The Gentiles ate different foods, they dressed differently, they talked differently. And, for the most part, the Jews couldn't see past those differences. Jews didn't want to have anything to do with Gentiles. They didn't want any Gentiles in their neighborhoods or in their churches. In our text, Paul's primary reference to that difference was the five-foot high wall between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of Women in the temple at Jerusalem. On this wall appeared the often-repeated inscription to Gentiles warning them to go no deeper into the temple boundaries or they would risk losing their lives.

The wall represented the prejudice, which was a burning issue between the Jews and the Gentiles. There was no love lost between these two groups of people. There was such contempt for the Gentiles that the Jews had made many laws against them. For example, a Jewish person could not offer aid to a Gentile woman even if she was in childbirth and desperately needed help. To enter a Gentile house rendered a Jew ceremonially unclean. Marriage of a Jew to a Gentile was looked upon as the equivalent of death. They actually had made a special funeral service for the Jewish person who married a Gentile. Jews hated Gentiles. They considered Gentiles to be impure animals, in particular, just like dogs. Jesus pointed this out in Matthew 15:26. It's here in our text that Paul makes the bold statement that by the power of God's transforming grace, Jesus came into the world to tear down just such walls of hostility.

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

Ephesians 2:13-18

Here God's Word is clear on the subject of prejudice. It says in no uncertain terms that prejudice is wrong in the sight of God. Yet in every society, there is always someone to be prejudiced against. What is there about human nature that makes us so love to hate? Make no mistake about it. It was wrong for the Jews to hate the Gentiles. It is wrong to hate any people group. It is wrong for Christians to hate Muslims and for Muslims to hate the Christians. It is wrong to hate people for the color of their skin.

It is wrong to hate people because of what they look like or where they are from or what they believe or what language they speak or what opinion they might have that is different from ours. It's been said we don't like or we get angry with people who don't sin like we sin. The same could be said about prejudice. Prejudice is a difficult attitude to overcome *because we are so good at it*. Jesus spoke about this in Matthew 7:1-2 when he declared: *"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you."* But, that being said, even so, you will never talk people into getting along with each other just because they ought to.

We see these things everywhere we look in the midst of the current chaos over the virus invasion. Dividing walls of hostility are all around us and with us and in us. How can we reconcile relationships that are broken because of the prejudice against those who hold to another belief or opinion? How can we bring together people that are so self-minded they cannot get along with people who are different from themselves? Consider Paul's situation in the New Testament. How could someone bring together these people who hated each other so much? They nurtured their hatred for hundreds of years.

How can we bring together the radically different opinions and cultures of our today? It cannot be done by reasoning. It cannot be done by legislation. It cannot be done by social interaction. Paul reveals to us the secret of breaking down the dividing wall of our hostilities between God and between each another when he says, *"For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility"* (Ephesians 2:14). Jesus is the one who broke down the wall of hostility.

Here we read that the power of God's transforming grace – the gospel of Jesus Christ - breaks down the dividing wall of our hostilities between God and between each another. Christ has come to break down the barriers. He demolishes the foundations of all the walls that divide us. When Jesus died on the cross for our sins, he destroyed the wall that separated us from God and each other. We all stand as sinners before God. Our only status before God comes because of Jesus' forgiveness and acceptance of us. The cross of Christ is the great leveler of all humanity. Jesus' death on a cross reconciled our broken relationship with God and our broken relationships with each other. These are powerful words, which if properly understood, could put an end to the walls that stand between different people groups.

A story is told that many years ago there was a castle on the English coast owned by a landlord, but no one currently was living there. Vandals were coming in and destroying the place. So the landlord hired a contractor to build a nice rock wall around the castle. The fee was agreed upon and the contractor began his work. But after a short time the contractor began having trouble finding rocks for the wall. So he called the owner to complain about the situation. The owner sharply replied, "I don't care where you get the rocks, I want you to build that wall!" Sometime later the owner came to see the progress of the work, and found a beautiful high wall. He was so impressed with the fine work the contractor had done. It was a perfect wall for his castle. But then he went through the wall, and was stunned to find that there was no castle! The contractor explained, "There were all these wonderful rocks in that run-down old castle, so I used them."

This is the absurdity of when we become so prejudiced, so opinionated, so bias, so arrogant, so full of ourselves - that we are then unable to open ourselves up to power of the transforming grace of God that can come into our lives through another human being that is also created in the image of God. We think we are protecting ourselves, we are protecting something of cherished value, so we build a wall. But when the wall is built, we find that we have torn down everything of value within ourselves.

How can we break down the walls between one another? Paul says when we are both brought to God in one body through Christ. The truth is, we can't get closer to God and still be distant from others who also want to be close to God. It's like a circle that gets closer and closer to the center. The closer we are to God, the closer we become to other people from other people groups. It is only God who can break down the dividing wall of hostility. When we come close to God we become more like God. The Bible tells us we sin when we build walls between ourselves and someone else whom God has created. That is someone for whom Christ died. Such sin is against the other, against God, and against ourselves.

Jesus came to break down the dividing walls of hostility, not just between the Jew and Gentile but between all people. God intends to create "*one new man*" (new humanity). As Paul says in Galatians 3:28: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" As Paul continues on he tells us what it means to be "*one in Christ Jesus.*"

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.* Ephesians 2:19-22

In these words the apostle Paul describes the various positions and relationships we gain when – by the power of God's transforming grace – Jesus' death on a cross breaks down the dividing wall of our hostilities between God and between each another – then reconciling our broken relationship with God and our broken relationships with each other – making all of us one in Jesus Christ.

Paul describes these relationships by mixing metaphors. He starts out with our citizenship. Paul was a Roman citizen, and at times it was helpful to him to claim that. He says now our citizenship is in the kingdom of God. We're fellow citizens together. Then he switches to the metaphor of the family, and says we're members of God's household, all part of the same family, Jew and Gentile alike, male and female, poor and rich. All those barriers are destroyed in Christ because we're part of the same family. Then he switches to the metaphor of the temple and says we're being built together with Christ as the cornerstone, and the prophets and the apostles as the foundations. When we are one in Christ we are being built into the spiritual house where God dwells and manifests himself to the world by his Spirit.

Consider what all this means for us. After saving us, by the power of God's transforming grace, by making us alive together with Christ out of our spiritual deadness - God seats us next to Himself in the glory of heaven to show the entire created universe the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. And now we read that by the power of that same transforming grace - God, through Jesus' death on a cross, breaks down the dividing walls of our dark, self-centered, prejudicial hostilities between God and between each another - reconciling our broken relationship with God and our broken relationships with each other - making all of us one in Jesus Christ - so that the world will see manifestations of God's grace-saturated, Holy Spirit empowered reconciled relationships *in us*. The sins of pride, prejudice and self-centeredness have marred our ability to relate selflessly. It's the root of war, of conflict, of divisions in our homes, our cities, our communities, our churches. But God wants to demonstrate his rescuing power by transforming his people into his image and restoring the relational integrity that we were created for. We were created for a relationship with God and with one another – and in spite of our fallen, sinful nature, we have been created anew and reconciled by God in order to fully and joyfully live out our relationship with Him and with one another. The Christian faith is not to be lived out behind walls or in isolation. Jesus is our peace! We are one in Christ! Amen? Amen!