

July 19, 2009 II Samuel 7:1-14a
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2:11-22

Sermon Title: Divisions, Walls and Barriers

We have all grown up with walls and barriers in our lives. The world is divided in hundreds of different ways. Male/Female; Black/White/Brown; Rich/Poor; First World Countries/Third World Countries; Christian/Muslim/Jew; The Just/ The Unjust; Capitalism/Communism. After a while we grow accustomed to these divisions, walls and barriers. We begin to believe that they are ordained by God and that the inequities that go along with these divisions are normal and acceptable. Things haven't changed much since the time of Paul. But in Christ, Paul discovered a different perspective. In Christ we are One.

Call to Worship:

Our souls are filled with longing, O God,
For we are thirsty for your truth.

Sometimes we feel so alone and forgotten;
Even in a crowd we feel abandoned.

The good we have done seems to count for nothing,
And the forces of evil seem to prevail.

The standards we uphold seem to be failing,
And we pursue high values without reward.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
And why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God, for we shall again praise God.
Rejoice, for Christ lives in us!

Hymns #155 Rejoice, the Lord is King
#275 God of Our Life
#408 Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life

Prayer of Confession

We confess, O God, our repeated tendency to insist on our own way. We want to make a name for ourselves no matter who is hurt by our pursuit of fame. We want you to cater to our needs and our schemes, and we're upset when you do not ease the way for us. Forgive our unwillingness to listen when your word comes to us through parents, children, friends, and humble messengers. Open our ears and help us to discern when you are speaking, and when the popular advice around us is not of your will and purpose. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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We have all grown up with walls and barriers in our lives. The world is divided in hundreds of different ways. Male/Female; Black/White/Brown; Rich/Poor; First World Countries/Third World Countries; Christian/Muslim/Jew; The Just/ The Unjust; Capitalism/Communism. After a while we grow accustomed to these divisions, walls and barriers. We begin to believe that they are ordained by God and that the inequities that go along with these divisions are normal and acceptable. Things haven't changed much since the time of Paul. But in Christ, Paul discovered a different perspective. In Christ we are One.

Who among us this morning has not faced a wall in their lives that has restricted and impeded their march toward self-fulfillment? Some of us grew up under meager conditions. Funds were short in our home and what funds there were were devoted to keeping the basics of life on the dinner table. Financial walls have always been a part of our social structure. When it came time to go off to college, all my parents could do was to promise me that I would receive \$5.00 a week to cover my expenses. Mom kept her promise and every Monday for four years there would be an envelope in my mailbox with \$5.00 in it and a note from her. And, as I look back, it occurs to me that this wall served to challenge me and to inspire me more than impede my progress. Never the less, financial and economic walls do exist in the world today.

Now, there are some here this morning who have felt the walls and barriers that society has constructed around the issue of being born a woman rather than a man. If you are a member of the female category of the human race, I'd be

willing to bet that you have heard someone say to you in your early life, “you can’t do that, you are a girl”. Or, “you don’t need a full salary, you have a husband to support you.” I’ll never forget hearing a wonderful 80 year old woman share with her woman’s circle the dream that she had as a teenager of becoming a nurse, but her father refused to allow that to happen because it was not deemed a proper career for a “lady”, so, with tears flowing down her cheeks she admitted that was the reason for her becoming a teacher. There was a time when our own church, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the preceding branches, refused to allow women to serve as deacons, elders or preachers. The Scriptures appear to place rigid barriers on women. I use the word “appear” because a complete understanding of God’s Word does not support such walls and barriers. And I note that the upcoming General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, that branch which broke away from us when we merged the northern and southern strands of Presbyterianism back in 1988, will deal with the role of women in the PCA. The PCA does not allow women to be ordained as deacons, elders or ministers.

Only one or two of our members were alive when the 19th Amendment to the Constitution gave women the right to vote in 1920.

But how about the walls and barriers that racial and ethnic groups have faced. We do not have time this morning to extrapolate all the ways that mainline society has placed barriers in front of people who are different because of their skin color, or national origin, or their cultural background. Most of us lived through the tumultuous years of civil

rights. We know the conditions that existed during slavery. And we know the effects of the Jim Crow laws that sprang up after the Civil War. And we know the pain and agony that this nation, indeed the world, went through to begin to tear the walls down .

Speaking of walls, how about the walls and barriers that mankind has erected to protect a particular political agenda. When the Romans arrived on the Island of Britain they discovered that they could not subjugate the Scottish Highlanders. So they built a wall that was designed to keep the warring tribes from the northlands out. The French built a wall of armored fortifications across Europe designed to keep the Huns out of Western Europe. The Maginot Line served only to give France a false sense of security. So, when Hitler designed his Blitzkrieg all he had to do was do an end run around this wall of fortifications through Belgian and straight into the gates of Paris. When Communist East Germany could not stop the flow of refugees out of East Germany into Democratic Germany, they built a wall. Still, thousands of folks found ways to get around the wall, under the wall or over the wall until, at last the wall came tumbling down. Now, in order to “protect” ourselves from all those terrorist crossing our Southern Border with Mexico, we are building another wall. This wall says, keep out! This wall says, you don’t belong here! This wall says, “We can harvest our fruits and vegetables without you.” But, most poignantly, it says, you are different from us in culture and language and we don’t want you unless you become like us. Arnold Toynbee in his massive work: The Rise and Fall of

Civilization notes that one of the first signs of the fall of all civilizations is the rush to build walls around itself.

There were walls and barriers throughout the ancient world. The Hebrew People themselves felt the effects of these barriers. They were a unique people who traced their roots back to Abraham and Sarah. They were a different people who worshiped One God which was out of sync with the cultures that surrounded them. They were a nomadic people who had no homeland and therefore were forced to appropriate other people's grazing lands. Sometimes they were welcomed and sometimes they were rebuffed. As they developed and refined their Faith, they found it necessary to limit access to their community.

Remember when the Hebrew Children finally entered the Promised Land? God instructed them that when they conquered a village not to take any booty, and not to intermarry with the population. These weren't simply arbitrary rules. The religious leaders of the Hebrew People believed that they should be a separate and holy nation, and that meant not intermingling with native populations. To be a descendent of Abraham and Sarah the blood line had to be kept pure. There are numerous stories in the Old Testament which express this exclusiveness.

By the time of Jesus, the demarcation line was drawn between Jews and Gentiles. Barriers were established to keep the pagan Gentiles from intermingling with the holy nation of Israel. Paul, in writing to the Church at Ephesus reminds those who had come out of the Gentile community

that there was a time when they would have been shunned by the early Church.... Just as they would have been shunned by the Hebrew People.

Paul is speaking directly to the Gentile members of the congregation at Ephesus. He reminds them of the road blocks that the traditional members had placed in their way. The mark of that road block was seen in the practice of circumcision among the Jews, and so, Paul refers to these Gentile believers as having been born outside of the Faith. And what that meant was that they were excluded from citizenship in Israel. And this meant that they were foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God.

Can you imagine such a thing in our day. Simply because someone was born in a different culture, they could not participate in the Faith that we profess. That someone who is of a different blood line could not benefit from the covenant of love and grace for which Christ came to earth, and for which Christ died and rose again. It would be scandalous for us to hold to such beliefs. One of the jobs of people of faith is to break barriers down, not to build them up. To paraphrase Paul, it is the job of Christ's followers to bring folks who once felt like outsiders, who once saw themselves as outcasts, who once felt far away from God and disconnected from God.... It is our job to bring them near by the power of Christ.

In talking about the divide that existed between Jew and Gentile, Paul notes that it is through Christ that the two are united. It is through the life, death and resurrection of

Christ that people of different backgrounds are able to set them aside and become one.

Now here is where we get a discussion of the Peace of Christ. And the first thing we note is that Peace in this context is not the absence of war. The Peace of Christ is something much more fundamental to the human spirit. It is not about stop fighting. It about joining together in a common oneness.

Before, writes Paul, we choose sides based on this regulation or that, on whether we had the correct blood lines or who our grandparents were. Now, says Paul, in Christ we do not choose sides. In Christ, we see ourselves as one unit, not several. How revolutionary this must have seemed to those people who had learned to live with divisions and barriers all about them. Jew/Gentile; Roman Citizen/Pagan; Freeman/Slave; Aristocrat/Peon; Foreigners & Aliens/Citizens. And it was part of their socialization process that those born into one state of existence would not even dream of crossing the line and becoming something other than what they were born. We still see an element of this in the cast system of India, where if you were born into the **Brahmin** class you were destined to be a teacher, scholar or priest. And, if you were born into the **Dalits** class you were destined to be an outcast and untouchable for your entire life. Even the national laws which prohibit these classes has not been able to alter the pattern. Which tells me that you cannot legislate these barriers and walls out of existence. The change has to come in the heart of the people.

And Paul is very clear. Barriers and Divisions and Hostility are destroyed when we all focus on the central Peace of Christ. What makes us one is not some intellectual agreement that divisions are bad, but a common commitment to the One who has given his entire life to destroy the divisions that have separated us from each other.

Today we are presented with a supreme test of Paul's understanding of our Oneness in Christ. How do we respond to our Muslim brothers and sisters? How do we respond when one group rejects any possibility of oneness. How do we respond when the threat is not: I'm different and I want to stay that way; but: I'm different and I 'm not going to be happy until I have changed you to be like me.

How can two competing Faiths live together in the same world and find some modicum of oneness in spite of some fundamental differences? And doesn't Oneness in Christ require that all parties to acknowledge the place that Christ has assumed in bringing this oneness about?

So, I am leaving you with more questions than answers. By this time in our own individual Faith journeys, I suspect we have come to understand that barriers and walls have no place. But now we are faced with global divisions and competing world views.

The road ahead is filled with pitfalls and possibilities for those who acknowledge Christ as the center of their Peace. But it will not be an easy road, and the answers will not be easy, and the dangers will be ever present. I do know,

however, that it is precisely this Peace that compels us to make the journey. To explore other faiths and world views and to faithfully present the Love and Peace of Christ to others who would rather have walls and divisions and hostility.

And for those willing to struggle with their faith and its relationship with other faiths, we have this promise. ***“You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”***

(Ephesians 2:19-22)

Amen

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