

## THE WALLS THAT DIVIDE US

(07/16/17)

Scripture Lessons: Ephesians 3:14-21  
Mark 3:31-35

*“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” (Ephesians 3:18-19)*

In my sermons this summer I would like to focus on several passages from Paul’s letters not only to the churches that he founded but also to the entire early church. I would like to do this because I seldom draw from Paul in my reflections during the regular church year. As you know, I am drawn to the four gospels and particularly the Gospel of Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, because I am basically interested in Jesus: in his life, his teachings, and his healings.

However, Paul can help us understand what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a Christian church. Paul was the greatest missionary and also the greatest theologian in the history of the church. Paul takes Jesus’ teachings and tells us how to actualize them, how to live them within the context of not only a Christian community but also a secular culture. He speaks an important word to us and to our time.

Our scripture lesson this morning is taken from Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus. Biblical scholars generally regard this as the most sublime of all Paul’s writings. The Scottish biblical scholar G. C. Martin has written of Ephesians:

*It is beautiful in expression, but more beautiful in thought, carrying us to the highest pinnacles of Christian speculation with a daring that is matched only by its reverence and humility, and wins our allegiance by its perfect reasonableness. Its language and imagery have passed into the richest treasures of the church, and on them have been founded her finest hymns and most immortal allegories.*

The theme of this brief letter is God’s eternal purpose in establishing, evolving, and bringing to fullness the universal church of Jesus Christ.

The Letter to the Ephesians is constructed around a Trinitarian theme. The members of the universal church of Jesus Christ, who have been drawn from different backgrounds and nationalities, have been called by God the Father; have been redeemed through his Son, Jesus Christ; and have been incorporated into a fellowship that is sealed and directed by the Holy Spirit. Paul uses several metaphors to describe the essential

nature of this church. He describes the church as the body of Christ (1:23, 4:16); the building or temple of God (2:20-22); and the bride of Christ (5:23-32).

Throughout the letter, and especially in the third chapter, Paul is trying to remove the walls that divide us from one another. This is a very important issue. It may be the most important issue of our time in light of what is happening not only in our country but also throughout the world. Our future, the future of the church, the future of our nation and the future of the world may well hinge in the balance.

If we are to grow into fullness of life, we must become individuals. Each of us is unique. Our great task in life is to find, accept, develop, celebrate, and live out that uniqueness. This uniqueness is what we have to share with the world in the unfolding drama of creation. If we do not become the individuals God calls us to be, we will have missed the point of life. Our values will then merge with and become indistinguishable from the values of our collective culture. When we fail to individuate, we blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, the imprint of God that has been placed deep within our souls.

The shadow side of individuation, however, is the loneliness that accompanies it. In order to become individuals we must establish boundaries between other people and ourselves. Boundaries are healthy; they are essential to the formation of our identity. Far too many people suffer from a lack of healthy boundaries within their families.

But boundaries can harden into barriers. Instead of being semi-permeable membranes, they can become walls that divide us from our brothers and sisters, from nature, and also from God.

There are many barriers that separate us from each other, that prevent us from feeling empathy and compassion for each other, from feeling and celebrating our human connection. Even on Sunday mornings, as we gather in our various churches, we are divided by walls of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Our religious beliefs, affiliations, and institutions may serve to separate us from our brothers in sisters in ways that are not healthy, that may even lead to persecution and war.

Paul tells us that the wonderful grace of God embodied in Christ Jesus is the means whereby our divisions can be overcome. Jesus, who incarnates the great barrier-breaking love of God, helps us to break down the barriers that divide us.

We New Englanders know the creative tension that found literary expression in Robert Frost's poem *Mending Walls*. Frost's neighbor, as he straightens the rocks on the line between their properties, tells Frost, "Good fences make good neighbors." Frost isn't convinced. He protests, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

The apostle Paul witnesses to "the breadth and length and height and depth" of the love of God in Christ. God's love tears down the walls that divide us. Paul was speaking specifically of the tension between Jews and Gentiles in the early church.

If we doubted the creative power of the Holy Spirit, we need only look at the composition of the church in Ephesus. The people gathered into this church had little in common. In the outside world, they found themselves separated from each other by many different barriers and distinctions, especially the historical barrier which separated Jew and Gentile. These people were now united in Christ.

Paul speaks of that God "who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (3:20). What Jesus began when he broke down the walls between the rich and poor, between Jew and Samaritan, between men and women, between the righteous and the sinner, a work that was continued by Paul, leads to the unity of all God's people in the church.

We can think of the church as no larger than our church or our denomination. We might even believe that ours is the true church; the rest are in error, are enemies of the truth to be converted, shunned, or killed. But this is not the only way of thinking about the church. Paul describes the church as the mystical body of Christ. Paul tells us there is "a wideness in God's mercy," that God's love is universal. We limit God's love and presence when we narrow it down to our own small province of sectional vanity.

William Willamon, Dean of the Chapel and Professor of Christian Ministry at Duke University, tells us that the Bible is the story of "a movement from the tribal to the universal, a conflict between those who would limit and monopolize God and those who would liberate Him and universalize Him." He tells us, "That battle is not yet over."

This is the battle, or hopefully the creative tension between those who hold that Christianity is the only path to God and those who believe there are many paths up the same mountain, who believe that the true God, the God beyond gods, is not a tribal deity. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians invites us, challenges us to consider the latter.

Martin Niemoller, a German churchman and theologian who struggled against the Nazi ideology that was devouring not only his nation but also his church, experienced first hand the false sense of superiority that led to the creation of those barriers which separated his countrymen from each other and from the rest of the world. Niemoller said, “It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of His enemies.”

What a statement! “God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of *His* enemies.” Niemoller reminds us that the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind. God loves those who love him. He also loves those who hate him. Just as he sends his rain upon the just and the unjust, so he offers his love to all. God loves those who hold orthodox Christian beliefs, and as Chad Walsh has said, he also stands lovingly and laughingly by the desk of the atheist who is writing a book to prove that God doesn’t exist.

The apostle Paul encourages us to think big, to think outside the little boxes that make us feel special but which create barriers between ourselves and our brothers and sisters in Christ, those who are also a part of his mystical body, even though their faith may find a different articulation.

Throughout this summer season, let us experience God’s great love for us. The message of Jesus, the message of the Gospel is that God celebrates our uniqueness. If we are truly incarnations of God, God loves us with all our warts, with all our imperfections. God loves us not only *in spite of* our brokenness; God loves us *because of* our brokenness. God’s Holy Spirit is constantly at work within us to heal us physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and also to heal our relationships.

In the weeks to come, let us also remind ourselves of God’s great love for all human beings, for all creation, for nature, for this environment that we so often take for granted, that we poison and destroy out of neglect and greed. God doesn’t limit the gift of this great and gracious love to Christians or even to human beings. God’s love extends to nature, to little animals, to all sentient beings. It is a presence and a power within all life, within all people, calling them forth to the fullness of life that we Christians have found in Christ.

In the weeks to come, let us remind ourselves that if God loves in this way, then we should love in this way. Let us try to move past those prejudices that create walls or barriers between us and other people, prejudices that hurt others and poison our souls.

If we can experience God's great love for us; if we can take on the mind and the heart of Christ; if we can live up to the challenge that Paul sets before us as individuals and as a Christian church, we will be doing our little part to further the healing of a broken and tragically divided nation, a broken and tragically divided world.

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