

A Diverse Community

Together in Christ amid Divisive Times Sermon 3

Ephesians 2:11-22

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11 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— **12** 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. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **15** 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, **16** and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. **17** And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. **18** For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. **19** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, **21** in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. **22** In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:11-22)

Recently I was taking a walk around our church property and noticed that a fence had been taken down. Rusted and barely upright, the old chain-link fence that separated the western edge of our property from the Clarion Inn Hotel was gone. This stuck out to me because over the summer a small crowd has developed in that hotel parking lot. I see them from my office window, as they pass the day sitting on lawn chairs or the sidewalk, enjoying conversation, a snack, and often a cigarette. These are homeless or near-homeless people who the county is sheltering in a few hotels, in an attempt to stave off the spread of Coronavirus in local homeless shelters. The Clarion Hotel, sitting in the shadow of our sanctuary, is their temporary home.

I’ve walked past them dozens of times, but this was the first day without the fence between us. I wondered what they thought of me as I strolled across the parking lot, dressed well enough, locking my nice car with a slick *beep-beep* after retrieving my sunglasses. Even with the physical fence down, I felt like an impenetrable wall stood between us. A wall between the successful and unsuccessful, the educated and uneducated, the well-off and poor, the privileged and less fortunate.

Would any of them dare to walk across our parking lot and through the doors of our church on a Sunday?

I don't know their stories, or what role success, education, wealth, race, or opportunity has played in their lives. But I do know that on that particular afternoon, as our eyes met across a new open space, it seemed a wall still stood between my world and theirs, between our soaring steeple and their curbside refuge. And it made me sad.

For many reasons, and in myriad ways, people can become divided.

Walls form between us. The walls can be due to social and economic differences, racial differences, rifts between neighborhoods, ideological differences, or any number of other reasons. It seems that fallen human beings have a penchant for dividing themselves in one way or another, and often this is not a good thing. And walls are not easy to bring down. Even if you do bring down the wall that is dividing people—be it a wall of law, or opportunity, or public opinion— it's an altogether different thing to talk about actually building a true connection between people. Demolishing walls of division is one thing; truly reconciling alienated people is another.

This fall we are examining the nature, habits, and loves of the Christian community. We are asking what this community is like, so we can better fulfill Paul's calling in Ephesians 4:3 to "be eager to maintain its unity." This week our attention is drawn to how this community's message, the Gospel, is uniquely capable to not only demolish walls of division but to reconcile otherwise alienated people. This all unfolds in Ephesians 2:11-22, where we'll see that a community created by the Gospel—is uniquely capable to not only demolish walls of division but to reconcile otherwise alienated people; a community created by the Gospel is a diverse community because the Gospel reconciles those whom the world would divide.

I want us to see this by walking through the passage and noting these three things:

Walls Rise to Heaven, the Law that Divides, the Man Who Reconciles.

I. Walls Rise to Heaven

Ephesians 2:11-22 addresses a menacing wall of the ancient world—the division between Jew and Gentile. We'll see it here from the Jewish perspective, how they viewed Gentiles. But make no mistake, during the first century, animosity ran both ways. Paul begins to run his hand along the wall, describing its contours:

11 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— **12** 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)

For Paul’s first hearers, this handful of terms recalled an ancient and alienating story. Those called the uncircumcised by the circumcised, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to covenants of promise—these terms come from the story of Israel, and what that story had come to mean for Gentiles.

Briefly recounted, when the world had spun into a mess and every person seemed to have lost connection to their Maker, God reached down and took the hand of one man—Abraham. God started a relationship with Abraham, promising that he’d bless his family and reunite them with their loving Maker. Here was the start of the people of Israel.

While this initial promise rested upon one people group, it was never exclusive. Rather, from its inception, God’s mission for Abraham and Israel was to be a light to all nations, so that through them other people would come to know their loving God and Maker. Genesis attests:

Now the Lord said] to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. **2** And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-3)

However, after centuries of fear and fighting with other nations, Israel turned inward. The mission to be salt and light was proving too costly, so they worked harder to preserve their people from the corruption of the world, and this meant walls. By the time of Jesus and Paul, much of Judaism had become a decidedly ethnocentric religion, and while there were Gentiles who converted to Judaism, it was more often the case that a wall remained between Jews and other peoples.

This can happen to any group trying to protect and preserve its integrity. But what can also happen, and seemed to happen, to at least some of the Jewish leaders of the way was a misunderstanding about the Lord’s favor. Israel had increasingly come to see God’s favor toward them as based, not on grace, but merit. Rather than seeing God’s blessings upon them as grace to be stewarded for the sake of others, that favor was a mark of their own superiority. This can happen to any of us: We

mistake God's blessing and favor upon us as a sign of our merit or natural ability, rather than a gift of sheer grace.

Israel becomes a wall

Instead of the Law being a light to the Gentiles, it blinded them. Instead of the Temple acting as a sign to the Gentiles for how to be made clean before God, it was a sealed-off fortress. Instead of Israel's worship being alluring to the Gentiles, it condemned them. This wall was not merely figurative; it was literal.

Archeologists have unearthed a stone slab from a balustrade around the Temple sanctuary, which had inscribed upon it in Latin and Greek, for the non-Jew, the words: "No stranger is to enter within the balustrade round the temple and enclosure. Whoever is caught will be himself responsible for his ensuing death."

The wall is not just wide, it also reaches up to heaven.

Many such walls have formed over history between different people groups. They express themselves in customs, dietary differences, and laws. However, what I want us to notice is that walls between people are not merely wide, but high. What I mean is that they are not simply realities, whereby one group makes judgments about another group's customs or habits. Rather, they are about vertical realities, how one group views the other group's inherent worth--and this is a spiritual judgment that has to do with God. What Paul has in mind now is a type of wall that reaches up to heaven. It's a wall rooted not merely in physical or social differences, but spiritual disdain.

When division exists between people, because one party views the other as irredeemable, as inherently inferior, as less-than-worthy to be recipients of God's blessings, a wall stands between them that reaches up to heaven. This wall suggests not only that this people or people group is cut off from you but cut off from God. Hence Paul says in verse 12, as he moves an imaginary hand up the towering heights of the wall, "having no hope and without God in the world."

The first thing we learn from our passage is not only something about the wall of division between Jews and Greeks that Paul was trying to navigate, but we also learn that the most impenetrable aspect of walls of division is not their width, but their height. When division reaches the point of viewing someone else as inherently unworthy of God's grace, as less than a being created in God's image, then no more remedying of social or economic differences will serve to bring it down.

That's the wall. In verses 13-18, Paul lays out how this wall is dealt with, and how reconciliation comes about. To see how the wall is dealt with, we need to consider yet another key aspect to it--the Law. We need to see that the Law divides.

II. The Law that Divides

Let's read verses 13-16 and see how the Law comes up:

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **15** 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, **16** and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Ephesians 2:13-16)

In verse 15, we find Christ "abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances." This is referring to specific aspects of the Jewish law, which explained that sacrifices were necessary to become clean before God and that certain dietary regulations were required to maintain holiness. For the Gentiles who didn't have nor keep this law, it was a dividing wall.

This is not to say that all law is bad, that the Old Testament Law is inherently bad, or that every law divides. Rather, we need to drill deeper. The basic theme of how the Jews saw the Law was that it showed that they were clean, and the Gentiles were dirty. For them, the Law was a standard by which they declared one group "in" and another group "out". I think we do something very similar today. I think it's in our nature to create standards by which we determine who's "in" and who's "out".

Our law, our great standard, judges one in or out based on whether you're educated well, if you're successful, if you're talented and attractive, if you have a successful romantic life, if you view current issues according to worldly wisdom or not. Humans make standards by which they then determine who is in, and who is out. There are two problems with this.

1. We are the ones who are deciding people's ultimate worth and often based on our own fallen assessment tools.

This produces terrible pride and takes us into an area that is reserved for God alone in the Bible.

2. The very standard by which we judge, we don't live up to.

We end up, deep in our own hearts, feeling like we were on the “outside”, even if we’ve been judged to be on the “inside.” The successful person suffers under the law of success; the attractive woman lives under the tyranny of fading beauty; the educated man realizes his IQ hasn’t made him wise.

For fallen humans, an ultimate standard, the Law, divides people groups, individuals, and the self from itself. And so for Israel, the very standards that the Gentiles didn’t live up to, were the same standards Israel herself couldn’t live up to. The law was dividing everyone. If there is to be reconciliation, then, one must come to deal not just with animosity between groups, but with the standard, the law, that is dividing everyone. Noting the wall that rises to heaven, and the law that divides, we need to finally look at the solution: the man who reconciles.

III. The Man Who Reconciles

In verses 13-18, Paul sets forth the solution to division, and it is found—not in a theory or policy—but in a man.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **15** by abolishing the law of commandments ... **18** For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:13-15,18)

Sometimes when conflicts are at their worst, and the two parties cannot reconcile, a third party, a mediator, is brought in. This person is supposed to bring wisdom and power that can help the situation. Something like this could be said to what happens in this text: Jesus, the mediator, comes in.

And He mediates in two ways: He sheds blood, and He preaches peace.

1. The Blood

Notice in verse 13 the means, the way, of bringing the far near is “by the blood of Christ”. In verse 16 a similar idea is stated when Paul says that He, Christ, “might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross”. The blood and cross signal the same thing: reconciliation is costly.

Blood deals with sin and reconciles to God.

Jesus' blood is shed to deal with sin, and sin is always at the heart of division. The reason the law is divisive, the great standard divides, is because it shows us our shortcomings, our failures, and selfishness, our sin. And it first shows us we need to be reconciled to God the Father. The blood reconciles both parties—Jew and Gentile—the successful and unsuccessful, the so-called educated and non, to God. Verse 18, "in him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father." There can be no real reconciliation between two people until both parties have been first reconciled to God. And this happens through the blood.

Blood also says something about Justice.

Division is often a result of wrongdoing, and one party may have been grossly hurt or abused, or oppressed. There can't be reconciliation if that party feels Justice is just brushed under the rug. The cross tells us that God is fiercely committed to Justice. The cross is a witness to God's commitment to punishing injustice, to deal with sin in a real way—either on the cross or at the final and great last judgment. This means the offended party can at least know that the God who is reconciling them, is committed to justice and that it will be had.

2. The Peace

More is needed, however, than merely upholding scales of justice. We are here aiming at more than the removal of a wall; we are aiming at the union of hearts. This is why along with shedding blood, Jesus brings peace.

The term "peace" comes up four times in the passage, and I want to focus on the first instance, which I think contains the key to understanding it. Here we read:

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** 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 2:13-14).

We read at the beginning of verse 14, "He himself is our peace." Not that Christ offers us a peace, but that He *is* peace; He himself, He truly, He and none other.

Jesus cares

Reconciliation, especially for a party that has been deeply hurt, requires knowing that they'll be cared for. The peace here is personal; it is Jesus Himself coming to you, committing Himself to you, to walk you through a process of healing and restoration.

Jesus protects

It also requires knowing you're safe. If the party you're being reconciled to has hurt you, how can you trust them? You only can when you see Christ at work in them--when you see that they have repented before God, have clung to Christ, and are now being transformed by Him.

Consider the example of Paul. Before he was a Christian, he persecuted the church violently. He watched over the spilling of Stephen's blood. He was deeply divided from the church. Once he was converted, the Christians were less than comfortable around him. How could they be reconciled to someone who so violently hurt them?

They only could do it through the person of Jesus. And this took time. It took a while for Christians in Jerusalem to see the change in Paul--to realize that he was different. It took time for old wounds to heal. But Paul was reconciled to them--so much so that he became a key leader. This only happened because they had Christ in common--He was their peace.

When I think of the so-called wall that stands between someone like me--educated, a steady job, a relatively stable life--and my friends on the curbside at the Clarion Hotel--I need to see that Jesus brings that wall down for them and me.

Let me come back to the so-called wall that I sensed between me and those folks on the curbside at the Clarion Hotel. There are real differences in their lives from my own, and things I should care about helping out with in any way that I can. However, if I understand the Gospel, and the nature of a community created by the Gospel, they are perfectly fit for our pews: for we are a people who were divided from God, poor in spirit, and wracked with sin. But Christ our mediator has come--He has shed His own blood for us and stands at the doorway of our church every Sunday saying: come in, I am your peace.

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins; and that blood flows through any human wall of division, uniting across any diversity, making the two into one new humanity.