

First Trinity Lutheran Church
July 23, 2006
Ephesians 2:11-22

Why do We Build Walls?

Why do we build walls? Walls in a home provide a barrier to keep out the elements, to ensure privacy, and to hang pictures. Walls that divide countries are built for security, because of fear, for protection, as a defense against hostile forces. Why do we build walls? The Great Wall of China was built to keep out the invading hordes of Genghis Khan and other powerful enemies. The Great Wall of China stretches 3946 miles which is longer than here to California. It has stood for over 2000 years and is a symbol of a peoples' desire to be safe.

In more recent history we will recall the infamous Berlin Wall and its notorious purpose of keeping people in. Those who had visited the wall before its destruction in 1989 said that they could feel the built-in suspicion and mutual distrust, the hatred and hostility, and the outright defiance represented by that wall. East German guards would watch with keen eyes both sides of the wall making certain that no one came in or out. Many people were killed trying to escape East Germany. And where their bodies fell, West Germans would erect crosses as a reminder and open defiance of the East German guards. Remember in 1989 how the world rejoiced when exultant Germans dismantled the Berlin Wall? What a time that was. West Germans were reunited with East Germans to become one Germany after 45 years of painful division. But when the wall came down, the Germans discovered an invisible wall that was even more difficult to tear down. There were two cultures at odds: one of an oppressed people, the other freethinking and prosperous. East Germans may have felt like 2nd class citizens, charity cases for the West, while the West may have felt resentment at having to support their poor brothers. It was a new kind of hostility still experienced today. And even more recently the Israel has been building a wall that separates them from Palestine. There is talk that the United States

government should build a wall or a series of walls between ourselves and Mexico.

All of us have invisible walls that been built over time but are now difficult to deconstruct. If we are honest about who we are we have to admit that we do not allow others to see our true selves and even if we do it is only for a very short time to a very specific person. We build walls because we are afraid people will see too much of us and thus have nothing to do with us. Or, we are afraid we will lose something if we allow others to influence us or change us. So we throw up a wall. We have many walls.

Jesus came to destroy walls. His mission was to remove the barriers that keep us from knowing God, knowing each other, and ultimately living in true relationship. In this part of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes how Christ breaks down walls and brings people together.

In the first century a wall separated people into two categories: Jew and Gentile. Apparently for the people living in Ephesus this division was the reality. There were in fact two types of divisions, social and spiritual. Regarding social division we read in v. 11 of Ephesians today that Gentiles were called a derogatory name by the Jews, the “uncircumcised.” For Jews, circumcision was a badge of honor, a mark of distinction: “We are God’s people and you are not.” There are two kinds of people to Jews: those who are Jews and those who are not. The Jews of Jesus day would often pray a pray like “Thank you Lord that I am not a Gentile”. These beliefs and attitudes created a huge wall.

Can you imagine the hostility that could ensue when you bring these two groups together in one church? There’s a lot of deep-seated animosity to get over. Let’s not kid ourselves – this is true of every ethnic group. There is always suspicion of other groups and a fear that outsiders will take away what we hold dear.

Lets look at the Spiritual Division. An even deeper division existed spiritually between Jews and Gentiles. This was a spiritual division based on genuine ignorance:

Gentiles were separate from Christ. That is, they had no hope of a Messiah. There was no savior to look forward to and so whatever deliverance they longed for was only a pipe dream. Gentiles were excluded from citizenship in Israel. Only Israel could be claim to be God's nation and only Jews could be called God's people. Even Gentiles who converted to Judaism were no more than 2nd class converts. The Kingdom of God and all its benefits were beyond Gentile reality. It goes without saying that Gentiles had no clue that God had promised anything to them. There were promises that applied to the whole world but the Jews selectively did not mention them. Common belief by Gentiles was that when you die, you die. You cease to exist. Gentiles were without God in the world. They had no knowledge of God on a personal level. Gentiles felt like outcasts in the church. They weren't Jews and they were fairly unaware of what Scripture said.

There are so many others walls that exist in and outside of the church today. There are ethnic walls: German Lutherans and Swedish Lutherans. Academic walls: College or University educated people versus high school dropouts. Male vs. female. Black and White, Latino and Hispanic, Asian and Arab. There are walls between husbands and wives; children and parents; old friends who haven't talked for years because of old wounds. There is a wall that separates Churched from unchurched people – the them and us mentality. There are so many walls, it is unbelievable how divided the community really is.

Question, when do walls become obsolete and unnecessary? When there is peace. What is peace? It is not when armies lay down their weapons. In the last 4000 years there has only been 268 years of peace. Is it peace when a husband and wife stay together for the sake of the children? Is it peace when friends agree to disagree and then not talk anymore? The walls are still up. Hostility still persists.

Paul outlines how Jesus defines peace with a dramatic “But now...” in v. 13. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.”

What is real peace? Peace is oneness and harmony. According to Paul Jesus is our peace. It is Jesus’ death that makes our peace possible. And it is only when we are at peace with Jesus and what he did for us that we can begin to solve the conflict around us. His peace through his own shed blood is what destroys the walls that divide.

When Jesus died the veil in the temple was torn in two exposing the Holy of Holies. The physical walls remained but the more impervious invisible wall was shattered. Shattered too were the false divisions, as Paul said, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). This was his purpose, to bring before God a new people without distinctions. You are not known by your gender, or by your race, not by your education, not by anything except that you are a child of God.

Nothing can keep you from coming near to God now. The walls that kept us from God are gone, but what about the walls that keep us apart from each other? These walls are created by hostility and hatred and distrust. How can we dismantle the walls of hostility? Paul said that Jesus abolished in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations...and through the cross he put to death their hostility. What creates hostility? A self-righteous demand upon someone. When we demand apologies without any admission of guilt on our part, or take a holier-than-thou position, we create hostility.

The Jews hated the Gentiles because they thought they were better than the Gentiles. They had the Law and therefore they thought they had God in their back pocket. It was this

feeling of superiority that created the divide and the hurt. The Gentiles could see through this self-righteous hypocrisy and in turn hated the Jews and their law. Jesus' solution then, was to take away the law and show them both how much they needed the grace of God.

This is the solution to the hostilities in our own world. We can break down the walls that divide us by being so self-righteous. Stop demanding that someone change for you without admitting that you need to change too. When we do that we end the hostility. But if we pretend that everyone else is wrong, that we don't need to change, hostility and resentment remain.

When the walls come tumbling the things change. Paul says "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household..." Everybody is included. Christ has created a new society where we are no longer outcasts.

Rules are made to be broken, the saying goes. Walls are made to be broken, too. The Great Wall of China was breached not by force but by bribery. The Berlin Wall was dismantled by ideas of freedom and liberty. Your walls cannot be broken by bribery or force or mere ideas. Your walls can only be broken by the person of Jesus Christ. The hostility that rages our souls keeps us from finding peace. We want things to be set right we want things our way.

God can seem far away too, when we demand that he make things happen the way we want him to. Peace with God seems to be hidden behind a wall. There is only one solution: Surrender. Give up our right to be right. Relinquish our feeling of hurt. Admit that we are human and release ourselves to the grace of Jesus. I struggled with something last week and finally I prayed to God "I am weak. I can't fight this on my own." And as simply as that I knew peace. Christ is our peace. Christ is our power to break down our walls.