



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

July 19, 2015

“Dividing Walls”

(Ephesians 2:14)

Rev. David K. Groth

*“For he himself is our peace...and has destroyed the barrier,
the dividing wall of hostility.” (Eph. 2:14)*

COLLECT: Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

There's something in us that loves to build walls...to keep the desirables in, the undesirables out. In the 15th century, the Ming Dynasty of China built a wall over 1800 miles long in order to keep nomadic tribes on one side of the wall from plundering farms on the other.

There's also the DMZ that runs for 155 miles along the 38th parallel separating North from South Korea. It's a highly charged buffer zone with tens of thousands of troops still lined up on either side. Interesting enough, no man's land, the space between these armies has become a sort of safe sanctuary for hundreds of rare and endangered species of animals and plants—a wonderful twist that I suspect makes God smile.

Walls define us, and help us establish who we are and aspire to be, over against those on the other side of the wall.

Sometimes walls are invisible but just as real. In most large American cities there are streets that suburbanites just don't cross, because on the other side are people they just don't trust. Conversely, those who live in that neighborhood often feel imprisoned by those invisible walls because on the other side are neighborhoods in which they may not be welcome.

There are walls of custom and culture, walls of race and ethnicity, walls of religion, walls built on centuries of hostility and hatred. And then there are those very personal walls we build up when somebody hurts us. We build them up brick by brick, with cold silence here, avoidance there. We are better at wall building than wall breaching—or wall removing.

In our text Paul is addressing the very real wall of hostility between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. It's a wall strengthened by centuries of mutual disparagement and mudslinging. To the Jews the Gentiles were "dogs" and considered "unclean." Close association with Gentiles meant "defilement." That's why in John 18 the high priests refused to enter the palace of Pontius Pilate so they wouldn't be defiled by being in a Gentile's home. You can imagine how it peeved Pilate that he had to come out to *them* and on *their* terms.

To be sure the Temple in Jerusalem had its outer "court of the Gentiles," where Gentiles were supposed to feel welcome, but that was the space eventually taken up by Jewish merchants and money changers and filled with overpriced oxen, sheep, doves and filth. Driving them out with a whip, Jesus was, in part, restoring that space for its original purpose, to be "a house of prayer" even for the Gentiles.

Gentiles treated the Jews similarly. They regarded Jews as "enemies of the human race," a people "filled with a hostile disposition toward everybody." Again, we can well imagine Pilate's tone and disdain when he asked Jesus "Am I a Jew? It was your people who handed you over" (Jn. 18:35). And in Acts 16, even across the centuries we can still hear the contempt of the Gentiles in Philippi when they say of Paul and Silas, "These men, *being Jews*, are causing trouble in our city." The hidden message being, that's what you can expect from Jews—nothing but trouble.

In the Old Testament, the Jews were, of course, God's chosen people, the people of the covenant. But over against that theme are whispers of God's ultimate plan. For example, in Isaiah 56 says, "Let no foreigner...say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people'....For this is what the Lord says: these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer...for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

That ultimate plan of God would not become a reality until Jesus lived and died on a cross. He is the key to the

reconciliation of disparate peoples, for he is the one who reconciled them to himself through Jesus. Paul writes there is now “one new man in place of the two” (v. 15) “so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” That reconciliation to God through Christ is stronger than the differences of race or culture or skin color.

To bring this reconciliation about first Jesus goes where Jews aren't supposed to go, into Gentile regions, like that of the Samaritans and the Decapolis, in order to teach and preach and heal, for the Good News is also for them. And the God he talks about doesn't seem so interested in excluding anyone from his love and grace. Jesus surrounds himself with sinners, cheaters, adulterers, sick and unclean, even a man possessed by demons living among the tombs...they all find there is room and welcome in his presence. The key is God's grace and mercy, his love and forgiveness and acceptance in Jesus Christ. He died for the world, not just for the chosen ones. Then he told his church, “Go, make disciples of all nations,” not just in Judea. What can hold disparate people together is their common faith in Jesus Christ.

Soon afterward comes Saul, who would later be named Paul, who began his journey at the opposite end of the theological spectrum. Saul was an expert in religious exclusivism. He was a Jew, a Pharisee in fact. He was so zealous in his faith that he attacked and hounded and persecuted the followers of Jesus. In fact, he was on his way to Damascus to root out Christians and have them imprisoned. That's when God knocked him off his high horse and worked a remarkable conversion in him.

Saul became Paul, and his brand of religious exclusivism was replaced with a grace filled theology of the cross which concluded that God's purpose in Jesus is as big as the world. God sent Jesus, not just to save a few fortunate ones who happened to be of the right race, but to heal and restore and redeem the whole creation.

The one intent on burying the Christian church becomes its most eloquent spokesman. The one who at one time was desperate to protect the Jewish faith from corrosive influences of the Gentiles, now writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The key is Jesus, and his redeeming love for all people.

God worked a radical change within Paul. The one who was bent on keeping the undesirables out now writes, “In Christ Jesus you [Gentiles] who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...He is our peace...He has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

That was two thousand years ago, but we are still better at building walls than dismantling them.

Last month, on the evening of the 17th, a young white man walked into a traditionally black church in Charleston, South Carolina. He was warmly welcomed to their Bible Study. The pastor pulled a chair up for him right next to his own, and for nearly an hour they studied Scripture. But that young man was not interested in God’s Word. His aim was to incite a race war. All indications are he was, is a white supremacist, having well documented and hateful views of races other than his own, especially of blacks. And so, at about 9 pm that evening, he pulled out a gun and started shooting, all the while shouting racial epithets. By the time he was done, nine were dead, including the pastor. I don’t pretend to understand his rationale. My guess is he figured if one death in Ferguson caused such strife, then many deaths in Charleston would cause an all out race war.

But the race war he intended never came about, and it has a lot to do with the response of the family members of those he killed. At the bail hearing, the judge gave the family members opportunity to address the killer. Nadine Collier, whose mother was killed, told the young man, “I forgive you. You took something very precious away from

me. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people But if God forgives you, I forgive.” Bethane Middleton-Brown said of her murdered sister, “She taught me that we are the family love built. We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive.” One after another they spoke. Their words were spontaneous and unscripted. They flowed like water.

As Christians, we are often patronized or mocked as silly, ignorant, or hypocritical. We have grown accustomed to it. Often we laugh along with the joke. But these were public statements that laid out the very essence of the Christian faith, unedited and undiluted, and no one could laugh at them or scoff. Their expression of faith and forgiveness took our breath away, and changed the nation’s response. For example, in a matter of days, most South Carolinians on both sides of the aisle agreed it was time to bring the confederate flag down from the state house. It wasn’t a decision based on justice, but based on compassion and mercy, the same kind of compassion and mercy the family had shown to the killer by families of his victims. It wasn’t the wisdom of the politicians who brought that flag down, and it wasn’t the hatred of Dylann Roof that caused that flag to come down. It wasn’t his sin, but their grace...the family members of the victims who forgave Dylann Roof. It took all the fight out of people. Those family members had shown the way, and the Way is the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Of course, there will always be some who try to explain away the Christian forgiveness. Some say the relatives who spoke at the bail hearing were acting out the traditions or survival mechanisms of their race. Really? They sweep away other worldly forgiveness as a racial tradition or a survival instinct? The forgiveness given at the bail hearing was not cultural, sociological or political. It was theological. It was about sharing the same kind of forgiveness with which we’ve been forgiven...unearned, generous, painful forgiveness. Those family members did not forgive in order to survive. They forgave in order to be faithful to the one who died on the cross for us. They

forgave because they have been forgiven. They forgave because they believe, as do we, that that night of the 17th was not the end of their loved ones' stories. They believe those who died in Christ are as they were...in the kingdom of God, beloved by him, their greatest longings realized.

Those family members know how to break down walls. And they didn't do it with indignation, accusation, aggression, and demonstration. They didn't do it by rioting and looting and burning down the local pharmacy. They did it by sharing the forgiveness and mercy of God in Christ Jesus. That's the way you break down walls of hostility.

Jesus is the key. He is the key to reconciliation between races, the key to reconciliation between individuals, the key to reconciliation with God. In him, there is no east or west, black or white, Jew or Gentile. "For he himself is our peace...and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing walls of hostility." thanks be to God. Amen.

