

Ephesians 2:13-22

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace. He made the two groups one by destroying the wall of hostility that divided them ¹⁵ when he abolished the law of commandments and regulations in his flesh. He did this to create in himself one new person out of the two, in this way making peace. ¹⁶ And he did this to reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by putting the hostility to death on it. ¹⁷ He also came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹ So then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household. ²⁰ You have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the Cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you too are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

“A Powerful Savior Brings Down the Walls.”

1. Some walls seem too solid
2. Jesus has destroyed all the walls
3. All Christians are now one people

Sermon for August 2, 2020; Pentecost 9, St. Paul's, Green Garden

Text: Ephesians 2:13-22

Theme: “A Powerful Savior Brings Down the Walls”

In the name of Jesus, who brings peace, dear fellow redeemed,

When we read in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, the O.T. laws God gave his people Israel we sometimes wonder ‘why all the restrictions’. Why the dietary laws, why specific commands to sacrifice a certain kind of animal; why the emphasis on certain festivals, why such strict rules about working on the Sabbath day? But God gave all those laws to set his people Israel apart from Gentiles. His people were different because they were looking forward in time to the coming of the Savior. So, yes, they should be different. God wanted a definite line in the sand between Jew and Gentile.

Israel had to learn this lesson the hard way when God consigned them to wander for 40 years in the wilderness before they could enter the Promised Land. When they had learned God's lesson and they were ready to enter

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Canaan they understood more clearly that they were supposed to BE different. The line between Israelite and Gentile was clearly established for them. At God's direction, Israel went in and took the city of Jericho. By God's mighty power the walls came down and Israel carried out God's judgment on the unbelievers of that fortified city.

But even after that wall come down the wall of God's law continued to separate Israelite and Gentile. O.T. Israelites were saved by faith in God's promise of a Savior. Gentiles were saved by the same faith. But usually a Gentile had to become a full-fledged Israelite before he could enter the covenant relationship with God and be considered one of God's people. In other words, a gentile had to become an Israelite or Jew, and be separate from other gentiles. Many gentiles simply would not do this. So in a sense they made God's regulations a barrier between Jews and gentiles or between believer and unbeliever. This caused irritation, hostility and surely there were many misunderstandings on both sides.

Now fast forward many centuries. Jesus came into the world. He lived and died and rose from the dead as God had promised. He was and is the Savior of the world. As the gospel of forgiveness in Jesus began to spread, Paul, the missionary to the gentiles, began to show how Jesus is the Savior, not only of the Jews but also of the gentiles. Jesus has broken down walls that stood between people and their salvation, walls far more imposing than the walls of Jericho. Even today, we need to understand that walls exist between believer and unbeliever but a powerful Savior brings down those walls.

What causes barriers, dividing walls between people? Many people would say, "Because we are fearful of the differences between us and others." And so many in the world will plead, "If we would just understand our diversity as different races, different countries, different cultures, different languages we would get along. If we would not view our differences as threats but see our differences as opportunities to learn about one another and about our world we would not shut some people out while we let others in who are more like us." But I think we can see that wars and rumors of wars, racial hatred and attempts to exterminate entire races, make it quite plain that such pleas for understanding and tolerance don't really change people's attitudes.

When Paul began to preach the gospel of Jesus to gentiles he knew he had the only message in the world that truly changes people's attitudes and breaks down the barrier that people often put up between each other. In O.T. times hostility existed between Jew and gentile because Jews had often set themselves

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apart as if they were better than gentiles. At Jesus' time Jewish leaders saw the Romans as a threat to their distinctive Jewish traditions. They believed their traditions were what made them Jews. But the wall also existed between Jew and gentile because salvation by grace is foreign to natural, sinful human beings. Man's natural religion is salvation by his own works.

The fact is, no matter who we are, where we come from or the country of our birth or national origin, we are all in the same boat spiritually. Every one of us needs a Savior to wash us clean of our sins. Jews cannot be saved because of their physical descent from Abraham; gentiles cannot be saved by the goodness they believe they have naturally, or the goodness they believe they can one day achieve. You and I cannot be saved because we are WELS Lutherans.

Paul uses the terms "far away" or "far off" to refer to gentiles who did not know the true God. He uses the term "those who are near" to refer to Jews who knew God's promises. That difference between the two groups might appear to be a wall that is too great. How can you reconcile Jews who hold themselves apart as God's chosen people with gentiles who feel like they have been rejected because they are not Jews? Paul refers to the Ephesian Christians as, "you who once were far away." In other words, they too, had once been victims of the dividing wall of hostility.

Do we cause people to feel that they are on the outside because they are not like us? Don't we need to look at ourselves for who we are? We are sinners who break God's laws each day. We have learned about Christ's love as members of his church. Now we see the need to reach out to the people in our community. We want them to see that the church is not a country club for those who think they are something special. Rather it is a hospital for sinners who need the healing salve of our Savior's forgiveness each day. This means that we want to project the attitude that our congregation exists for healing. We want people to see there are no barriers between us and them. Yes, this means anyone and everyone no matter what their sins of the past might be. Every person who knows his or her sins and sees their need for Jesus' forgiveness needs to know that the wall is broken down. But Paul makes it plain that sinful people cannot break it down. We cannot break down walls of hostility by pleading with people to embrace their differences or celebrate their diversity. It all sounds good, but it does not change the sinfulness inside us. We sinners cannot break down the walls of hostility, but Jesus breaks down all the walls.

Paul explains Jesus' answer to hostility: "**But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.**"

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Paul really says Jesus shed his blood and died on the cross to take away every sin. In that sense we are all the same. And now that Jesus paid the price for every sin of every sinner, we are still the same. But now, we are all God's heirs of eternal life. And what the world views as something horrible, something that divides people Paul says is the only truth, the only act that truly brings people together. **“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.”**

Jesus is our peace! He has made the two one. Who are the two? From Paul's perspective the two are Jews and gentiles. All the O.T. regulations about diet and sacrifices and festivals, that tended to be the outward dividing wall between Jew and gentile, Jesus broke down. How? In his flesh, that is by becoming a human being who kept all those regulations with such perfection and holiness, with such a purity of heart that the Father willingly told the world he is perfect and holy. Jesus not only obeyed those laws perfectly, but since God put them in place to point ahead to Jesus, they no longer serve that purpose. O.T. regulations are not needed. Jesus has made peace.

This peace is far different from man made treaties of peace. Treaties have often been broken. Sinful human beings make treaties and even if a country makes a treaty of peace with another, when a new ruler comes to power in one of those countries, he may decide he does not want to abide by the treaty, though he and his country are clearly bound by its terms. But the peace Jesus brings is far different. He brings peace between God and the human race through his cross. **And he did this to reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by putting the hostility to death on it.**

Wow! You would think a cross would be anything but an instrument of peace. In the Roman world death represented the worst punishment Rome could dish out to the worst of criminals. Criminals punished by crucifixion were on display for the world to see. But since Jesus died and rose from the dead, he put to death all our hostility toward God, AND toward each other. This means Jew and gentile, sinners from every walk of life are reconciled to God. God brings about a change in us. Jesus paid for your sin, your neighbor's sin, the sin of everyone whether we think they are far away and we are near, or whether we by our sins feel we, too, are far away. There IS NO BARRIER of sin. God loves you! You are his child and heir! Paul says all sin is gone. This means Jesus broke down the dividing wall between one sinner and another.

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Amazing! And just to make sure we get it Paul says, **“He also came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.”** Jesus’ message of peace is a message for everyone, whether Jew or gentile whether they were born to Christian parents who brought them up to know their Savior or someone who knew nothing of Jesus until adulthood. Jesus makes peace through his cross. That concept is foreign in a world that wants to make its own kind of peace, in a world that sees the cross as a dividing line. It is and always will cause division for those who reject it. Jesus said in this regard, **“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”** But his cross brings peace to those who believe and trust that he made payment for sin at the cross. We believe by his cross he made peace. This peace is not just until someone decides to break it. Jesus is God. He made a permanent peace between us and God who keeps his promises. So this peace has lasting meaning for your life now. You are always God’s child and heir. It also has meaning for your life with your fellow believers while you and I live on earth. All Christians are one people.

People in the world like to talk about unity, too. You hear a lot of talk during this pandemic that we are all in this together. Many believe this fact more and more requires us to embrace our diversity and look at ourselves in a unity with others. They want to say, **“Since we are all going through the same thing, we really should live at peace shouldn’t we?”** But real time experience tells us something else doesn’t it? Ideals alone will not give people a true reason to change.

Jesus gives us this reason to change. When he broke down the barrier of sin that existed between us and God it means every sinner has access to God. We can go to him for forgiveness, we can seek his blessing for the plans we make, we can ask his help and blessing on our loved ones and pray for those who are sick or dying.

And though Paul originally wrote this letter to the Ephesian Christians who were mostly gentiles, it was intended for all the churches in the Roman world. Consequently it is for us also. We need to know for ourselves and we need to proclaim to others that every believer is a member of God’s family and household. What’s more, this household is solid both in its foundation and as a spiritual house. Paul says the Christian Church of all believers is, **“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.”** What the O.T. prophets foretold about

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Christ came from God. And everything the apostles in the N.T. taught they learned from Jesus as he taught them the OT scriptures. Though God used human messengers to preach his message, Jesus is the foundation of the church. Without him and his message of peace through the cross there is no reconciliation with God and there is no Christian Church.

But through Jesus this temple of God's people is being built daily. It is a constant process. New members are added to God's house each time the Spirit brings a soul to faith by hearing the word and by the sacrament of Holy Baptism. This surely causes us to rejoice to know that God blesses our mission offerings as the gospel reaches lost sinners in Russia, Taiwan, Africa, South America, Indonesia, Mexico, India, Thailand, China and so many other places around the world. We have Christian brothers and sisters all over the world because the gospel breaks down every barrier sin had caused.

And you know, even at the battle of Jericho where all those unbelievers died, God even used the gospel to start breaking down the barriers of sin. You know that one resident of Jericho, a prostitute named Rahab was offered safety because she helped Israel's spies. You may know that Rahab, a gentile, became an ancestress of Jesus Christ. Any barrier or dividing wall that we think is impossible to deal with Jesus breaks down, through his cross. He has done it in countless lives through history. He does it in our lives and in our congregation and through his church each day. Amen.