

Tearing Down the Walls

Ephesians 2:11-22

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With Palestine formally requesting membership in the United Nations last week, and so much talk of peace and possibility, and of hostility and hopelessness, between Israel and Palestine in the news, the memories of my travels there now seven years ago come flooding back to me. I remember wandering the markets in Old Jerusalem, marveling at the artistry offered in every local shop: textiles, pottery, paintings, beautiful sights, sounds, and smells. I remember the kindness of strangers who invited us into their homes for tea. I remember the gorgeous landscape of the region with its rivers and waterfalls. I remember citizen soldiers guarding elementary-school field trips with machine guns. I remember check-point after check-point, and whole towns in despair because tourists could no longer access their shops and restaurants. But perhaps the most vivid memory for me is the wall.

I am old enough to remember when the Berlin Wall came down, but just barely: I was 9 years old when I gathered around the television with my parents in our suburban Atlanta living room to watch elated families and friends reunite with tears streaming down their faces, jumping over and picking away at the heap of concrete that had separated them for so long. I knew this was a big deal, because of the emotional reactions of my parents and others. But I didn't quite understand what the separation had been about, or how painful it had been for so many, or what reunification really meant in this case.

So when I saw the wall separating Israelis and Palestinians in the land they both claim as home, it was really the first time I had seen division take on such a tangible form. Israelis call it a "security fence." Palestinians call it the "Apartheid wall." No matter what you call it, it's huge: 470 miles long and 26 feet tall. That's like building 2.5 stories from here to Redding, CA or Helena, MT or Twin Falls, ID. It would take you all day to drive its length, or more than two weeks to walk it at an aggressive pace. It's a big wall. Israelis say they need it for protection from suicide bombers. Palestinians say it's an illegal attempt to annex their land, severely restricting movement and access to work. Either way, it keeps people separate, for better or for worse, divided by different ethnicities, religions, and languages; but mostly divided by a concrete wall, which makes reconciliation darn near impossible.

There are few places in life when our divisions are so obvious, so in our faces, so dramatic. But if we are honest, divisions like these exist all over the world, in all of our lives, and even in the church. Our walls may not always be made of concrete and steel, but they are just as powerful. We aim to keep others out in the name of protecting ourselves. We exclude others with walls called racism and sexism and heterosexism and age bias and cultural difference even religious arrogance. And yet in the second chapter of Ephesians, we hear that Christ has broken *down* the walls that divide us, making peace. Christ has brought those who were far away near, and united even such different groups as Jews and Gentiles into one new body called the church. Christ has taken God out of the Jerusalem temple and built a new temple that is no building at all, for it is God's people. So why do we keep building walls? Whether we call them protection or security or cultural identity or just comfort, at some point we have to admit that these walls are not what God intended.

Paul¹ says in Ephesians that Christ has brought us peace in two realms: peace with God and peace with each other. All of us have been separate, excluded, foreigners without hope and without God in the world. All of us have been far off from God, unable to reconcile ourselves with God, kept separate by our sin. And yet through Christ we have been brought near, included, given a place of belonging and a hope that never ends. Christ has eliminated the need for the law, for the middleman, offering us grace directly from God, so that we can draw near to God even as God draws near to us. It's not something we can affect ourselves – it *has already been done*, according to Paul. God has done the reconciling, something we would be unable to do.

But Christ has also brought us peace with each other, uniting those who had such disdain for one another, such astounding differences, into one body. Now the Scripture doesn't say, "The Gentiles were made into Jews" or "The Jews were made into Gentiles." This is not like the little river that flows into the bigger river and loses its identity altogether. These two were brought together and made into one new body, united in Christ. Neither gave over its uniqueness or distinctiveness to the other: neither had to give up who they were to be unified in a kind of peace that is far greater than the absence of hostility. The peace referred to here is far greater than the end of fighting or a break in the war: it's peace that *is* Christ, peace that is life in God: wholeness, righteousness, justice, salvation. It's what the Hebrew Bible calls *shalom*.

And yet, we read about this peace, this unity, and we look around and think, "What the heck happened?" Jews and Gentiles are not reconciled today, and neither is anyone else. Even Christians are not all unified. Protestants are not all unified. Methodists are not all unified. Individual congregations are not all unified. What has happened to us, and how do we achieve this peace that Paul says we should already be enjoying?

I think it's important to note what this chapter in Ephesians tells us to do, and what it doesn't tell us. This isn't one of those texts that gives us a lot of instructions: it doesn't say, "Stay away from evil" or "avoid unclean food" or "spend about an hour in prayer every day." It doesn't say, "give yourselves to multicultural experiences and try to understand people who are different than you." It gives just one imperative, in verse 11, the first verse we heard this morning: "*Remember.*" "*Remember* that you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship, foreigners to the promise, without hope... but *now* you have been brought near." *Remember*, it says, that you were dead to sin and have been given new life. Remember that you are nothing apart from God, and can never deserve the grace that's already been showered on your life. *Pay attention* to what's happened, because it's a miracle: you who were not a people are now called God's people, brought out of darkness into the marvelous light.²

Remember the history of salvation, *remember* what has been done for you. But most of all, *remember* who you are and who you follow. Because Christ *is* peace, and to be a Christ-follower is to be a peacemaker. It's to be one who tears down walls, not builds them up. It's to be one who works for unity, not division. It's to be one who celebrates difference without building separation because all people are looking for nearness and belonging rather than estrangement and distance.

One of the issues we face as Christians is that we have a tendency to be so self-centered that we create Christ in our own image. We make Jesus into whoever we want him to be, giving

¹ The authorship of the letter to the Ephesians is debated, but authorship seems irrelevant in this context, so I will use the widely accepted authorship of Paul to avoid confusion.

² 1 Peter 2:10

Christ whatever personality is most convenient and comfortable for us. But Paul's command for us to 'remember' here tells us that we are stuck with the Jesus who was and is and is to come, the very one who told us to be peacemakers in his most famous sermon. Take him or leave him, *this* is our Jesus, the one who Ephesians says *is peace*. We cannot pretend he is anyone else. But how long will it take for us, we who claim to follow Jesus, to come to terms with what he asks us to do?³ When will we, the church, realize that the one called *peace* is the one we're called to follow?

On this World Communion Sunday, when we acknowledge that we share a table with brothers and sisters around the world, when we will plant a post in our garden that proclaims to all our prayer that peace may prevail on earth, we are called to remember that Christ is peace, that Christ has brought us into peace, that Christ has broken down all barriers to peace. And we remember our call to work for peace. Now by 'peace,' I don't mean "a happy feeling deep in your heart." I mean reconciliation and forgiveness, the most challenging work in which we can engage in a world where most issues are settled with power and violence and the building of barriers. This is not forgetting the wrongs of the past or overlooking differences, but wrapping up the past in a blanket of forgiveness and humility, recognizing that all of us are forgiven sinners, too; and acknowledging that the primary marker that defines us is not our skin color or our music preference or our language or the power we hold over one another, but that we have been claimed as people of God.

It is the duty of the church to be an example for the world of how to imagine the resolution of differences without the violence of wall-building or the destruction of war. It is the duty of the church to choose the reality of Christ's peace over the divisions and power games encouraged by culture. It is our duty, *each* of ours, to teach the world how to live as forgiven and reconciled people, that we might remember who we are and to whom we belong. It is our duty to live the peace that Christ has already brought, to be the people we were created to be, to walk out of darkness and into Christ's light. Amen.

³ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, location 543 in the kindle version.