



Ephesians 2:11-22

*“Breaking Down the  
Dividing Wall”*

*Sermon preached at  
Skyline Presbyterian Church  
Pentecost Sunday, July 22, 2018*

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One of the most famous walls ever built is the Great Wall of China. It's more than 2,000 years old, but it remains one of the great wonders of the world. Stretching 4,500 miles, from the mountains of Korea to the Gobi Desert, it was first built to protect an ancient Chinese empire from tribes in the north.

Another famous wall was the Berlin wall. Constructed on August 13, 1961, that twenty-five-mile wall was erected in the heart of a divided city. But it was really just a small part of a much larger wall called the Iron Curtain.

The Berlin wall symbolized the separation of East from West with its menacing parapets and threatening barbed wire and its steel roots running down into the sewers. It was made up of concrete segments with a height of 11 feet, usually with a concrete tube on top of it. Behind that there was an illuminated control area, also called “death area.” Refugees who had reached that area were shot without warning. A trench followed which should prevent vehicles from breaking through. Then there was a patrol track, a corridor with watchdogs, watchtowers and bunkers, and then a second wall. Millions of people rejoiced when that wall came down on November 9, 1989.

The Israel-Gaza Barrier is a 37-mile border barrier first constructed by Israel in 1994 between the Gaza Strip and Israel. We are hearing weekly of the atrocities occurring at the Israel-Gaza Barrier.

And of course, there is our very own much contended United States-Mexico border wall. We currently have 580 miles of barriers in place. The total length of the continental border is 1,989 miles.

These are perhaps the most famous walls, but there are walls everywhere. Robert Frost's poem entitled “Mending Wall,” describes the New England farmer's job of repairing a rock fence in the spring. Together, he and his neighbor put the fence back together stone by stone. One line in the poem says, “Something there is that doesn't love a wall.” But in this same poem, the neighbor is of a different mind. He still believes the word that his father taught him: “Good fences make good neighbors.” I, for one, do not believe Frost thinks fences make good neighbors, but it is a line that many believe. There are fences and walls everywhere. The wall is everywhere. All of us know about it. No generation has

gone unshaped by its pernicious power. Its menacing power moves the length and breadth of human existence.

What wall is it? Paul calls it the dividing wall of hostility. It is the wall that separates and fragments and isolates. It is the wall that keeps people apart. It makes us suspicious and distrustful of others. It kills fellowship and breeds prejudice and spreads gossip and sets loose the hounds of war. It takes many forms but it always remains the same wall wherever we encounter it. Humankind must love a wall; we've built so many of them.

In our text, Paul's primary reference was the five-foot high wall between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of Women in the temple at Jerusalem. On this wall appeared the often-repeated inscription to Gentiles warning them to go no deeper into the temple precincts. If they did, they would have only themselves to thank for their death, which would inevitably follow.

This wall represents the prejudice, which was a burning issue between the Jews and the Gentiles. There was no love lost between these two groups of people. There was such contempt for the Gentiles that there were many laws against them. For example, a Jewish person could not offer aid to a Gentile woman even if she was in childbirth and desperately needed help. To enter a Gentile house rendered a Jew ceremonially unclean. Marriage of a Jew to a Gentile was looked upon as the equivalent of death. They actually had a funeral service for the Jewish person who married a Gentile. Bible commentator F.F. Bruce said, "No iron curtain, no color bar, no national distinction or frontier of today is more absolute than the cleavage between the Jew and Gentile was in antiquity." In fact, the miracle of the New Testament was the inclusion of the Gentiles into Christianity.

Paul makes the bold statement that Jesus came into the world to tear down just such walls of hostility. Listen to it again:

"Once strangers," says the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Ephesus, "we are now brought near by the blood of Christ. He is our peace." This is no easy reconciliation, no easy peace. These are heady words, not because they have to do with ancient and eternal realities, but because these are the words of revolution. "He is our peace." These are words of treason. These are words opposed to the state. These are words meant for demonstrations and protests against empires.

Princeton Seminary Professor Sally Brown reminds us that: "The new household of God is not a purely spiritual reality that we visit briefly on Sundays—a weekly time-put in which we pretend peace is possible by sitting next to people we avoid the rest of the time. The church is the daring practice of new politics—a different kind of power, the self-outpoured, boundary-crossing power of Christ's cross." God bringing diverse and disparate people together is an affront to the divisive powers of this world. Imagine how subversive the church today would seem if "aliens" and "strangers" were all gathered together in our pews? God reconciles us to God's self, but we live out this reconciliation in courageous and creative ways through our boundary-breaking relationships with each other.

This is a text meant to shake empires.

Ephesians 2:11-22 directly challenges the swaggering claims of Rome's emperors, who saw themselves as the semi-divine forgers of a new world peace. Likewise, it undermines all systems that secure distinction and top-down privilege by setting up barriers that identify some as insider and superior while identifying others as outsider or inferior.

In the late first century under Roman rule, talk of peace would be politically charged talk. Roman emperors, Augustus in particular, were hailed as the semi-divine inaugurators of an unprecedented peace that would settle the turbulent rivalries of the Mediterranean and Asia Minor.

This *Pax Romana*, this Roman brand of "peace," of course, was an *enforced* peace wrought through military dominance. When necessary, terror would be used—specifically, the terror of crucifixion for anyone foolhardy enough to challenge peace on the Empire's terms. On state occasions and festival days such as the birthday of the emperor, when the emperor's "lordship" would be celebrated, the emperor as "peace-bringer" would be glorified in public speeches.

Imagine that we, a community of Christians in the Roman Empire, are tightly packed into the largest home available for the first reading of a new treatise that has arrived—the one that will later come to be known as the Letter to the Ephesians. We're gathered to hear it read out loud, of course, because most of us cannot read. As the reader gets to the part that says, "You who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ . . . He is our peace," there is a quick intake of breath and glances toward the door.

Who may have heard?

"Christ is our peace" (verse 14) would be a pronouncement bordering on treason. What is being claimed, after all, is that despite all the swaggering claims of Rome's emperors, true peace is offered to *all* through Jesus. Peace with God, Shalom, is not a tribal religion any more. It no longer belongs to the Jews only. The walls of prejudice have been broken down.

It seems that in every society, there is someone to be prejudiced against. When I was a very young girl, I thought the only prejudice there could be was the one between whites and blacks. But then I learned many are more prejudiced against Natives than they were against blacks. And for some, there is an intense prejudice against Mexicans, against all Latin-Americans. For others still, the prejudice is against the Vietnamese, or against all Asian-Americans. After September 11, 2001, many people turned their prejudice against Muslims. In almost every culture, there is someone against whom we can be prejudiced.

Why is this so? What is there in human nature that makes us so love ta wall?

Walls are made from stereotypes. And it turns out that stereotypes are not only offensive, they are also

comforting. As I learned from columnist Maureen Dowd, “They wrap life in the archetypal toastiness of fairy tale and myth.” They make complicated understandings unnecessary. They permit people to identify the appearances with the realities, and so exempt them from any further mental or emotional effort. They keep familiar things familiar. They are not completely false, but they are completely shallow.

Christ is the one who revealed our shallowness and broke down the wall of hostility. Why would we erect new walls? What are we walling in? And what are we walling out?

Let me illustrate with a story: There once was a castle on the English coast owned by a landlord, but no one currently was living there. Vandals were coming in and destroying the place. So, he hired a contractor to build a nice rock wall around the castle. The fee was agreed upon and the contractor began his work.

But after a short time, the contractor began having trouble finding rocks for the wall. So, he called the owner to complain about the situation. The owner sharply replied, “I don’t care where you get the rocks, I want you to build that wall!”

Sometime later, the owner came to see the progress of the work, and found a beautiful high wall. He was impressed with the fine work the contractor had done. It was a perfect wall for his castle. But then he went through the wall, and was stunned to find that there was no castle! The contractor explained, “There were all these wonderful rocks in that run-down old castle, so I used them.”

That is the folly of anyone who is so prejudiced that they do not open themselves up to the grace of God that can come through another human being. We think we are protecting ourselves, we are protecting something of cherished value, so we build a wall. But when the wall is built, we find that we have torn down everything of value within ourselves.