

Ephesians 2:13-22

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

SERMON:

May the words of my lips and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Oh God, my rock and my redeemer...

Imagine that we are a community of Christians in Asia Minor, late in the first century. We 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, 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. For He is our peace," there is a quick intake of breath and glances toward the door.

Who may have heard? For saying "He [Christ] is our peace" 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 has been inaugurated by a man the empire *crucified*.

Sally Brown, from Princeton theological seminary, says 'this text is meant to do more than coax cranky congregants toward compromise, this is a text meant to shake empires.' A text meant to shake empires.

It is crucial to recognize that any talk of peace within the context of Asia Minor in the late first century under Roman rule would be politically charged talk. Roman emperors, Augustus in particular, were hailed as the semi-divine bringers of a peace that would settle the turbulent rivalries of the region. 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 foolish enough to challenge peace on the Empire's terms.

Ephesians 2 directly challenges the swaggering claims of Rome's emperors, who saw themselves as the forgers of a new world peace. Not only that, this passage undermines *all* systems that set up barriers which identify some as outsider or inferior.¹

Have you ever felt like an outsider, like one of the Sneeches without a star on your belly? I have. I've felt invisible, like I didn't matter. I remember when we moved to Lancaster County, in the mid-1990's. We'd just bought a small farm and were beginning to put down roots. Still trying to find a

¹ Brown, Sally. 2012. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1332

church to plug into, I was desperate for community. Kids are such a gift - and I've heard dogs can be too - for breaking the ice and forging connection with strangers. When my oldest, Peter, who was 7, wanted to play soccer, that felt like a natural way to break in. Oh, but I learned, the walls of Lancaster County run deep. We'd go to practice, or to a game, and I'd dutifully take my green folding chair out of its carry bag, set it up on the sidelines, and then force myself to edge my way over to the other moms, clustered there, talking like they'd known each other their whole lives, which was likely the case. Small talk has never been my strong suit, so finding ways to climb over, or under, or around those invisible walls that separated us was challenging, to say the least - how was I, an outsider, supposed to connect with this tightly bound group, many who had never lived outside of Lancaster County, who had no need for another friend? Being an outsider is painful. I felt like an alien. Inferior. And these women probably had no idea what was happening. They weren't excluding me to be mean. They just didn't see me. The privilege of belonging meant I just wasn't important enough to get to know. Nothing personal.

I wonder if that's how it was back in the days of the Ephesians. Here we have Jews and non-Jews gathering together for worship. They probably had different customs, different songs they knew, different foods they ate, or didn't eat. Before coming together to be the church, they were strangers to each other - likely mistrustful of one another. Chances are there was a sense of superiority, of some being the in-crowd, others outsiders.

But here, in this letter, they heard: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

The writer declares that all, *all* gathered in that space, listening to this letter being read, are citizens of this new community, where Christ himself is the cornerstone. Citizenship was highly valued across that first Century Empire, so much so that among the foreign peoples conquered by Rome, some would pay great sums for citizenship. But here, citizenship is offered freely for those who believed in the crucified one. The cross undermined the wall dividing Jew and non-Jew, but that was only the beginning. In the time this letter was read, as well as today, *the church is called to be the daring practice of a new politics -- a different kind of power, the boundary-crossing power of Christ's cross.*

I wonder, what are the walls that divide us, here at UMC; in the broader church; in our country? What are the walls that make some of us insiders and others feel like outsiders? Is it the amount of time you've worshipped here? Is it living in a specific part of this town, or this county, that leaves some feeling outside or inside? In the larger Mennonite church today, there are plenty of walls, many surrounding the interpretation of scripture, especially regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ persons, that have led to exclusion, leaving some feeling like aliens, even in the churches they've faithfully attended their whole lives.

Our reading today began with these words: “For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

As Sally Brown wrote in her commentary, back in 2012, this is a text meant to shake empires. How relevant this text feels today!

This letter to the Ephesians declares peace on new terms, the peace forged not by the "lords" of Empire, but in the blood and bone of the Crucified. Peace, and what today we may often call safety, is not found in the building of walls. Walls that make some insiders and some aliens. No, Christ came to break down the dividing walls. This letter of the Ephesians, reminds us that "Christ abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he, Christ, might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it." Oh what a vision - that we might be created into one humanity, with no dividing walls, reconciled through Christ's love.

Shane Claiborne, Christian activist and author, says "Over the past few decades, our Christianity has become obsessed with what Christians believe rather than how Christians live. . . . But in Jesus we don't just see a presentation of doctrines but an invitation to join a movement that is about demonstrating God's goodness to the world."²

...To seek justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with our God...

This letter to the Ephesians, penned thousands of years ago, calls us to dismantle the many walls we build - literal ones, figurative ones - walls built

² Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo, *Red Letter Revolution: What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?* Thomas Nelson: 2012

on making one group less worthy, less important - whether it's divisions of class or race or ethnicity. Christ calls us to a new way of being in the world. "For God so loved the WORLD..." The world. Not just a certain section of it. The writer of this letter was calling his community to put aside their differences and make space for the "other" next to them.

Christ calls us to a new way of being - of breaking down the walls, removing the stars from our bellies and intentionally making space for everyone, regardless of class, race, gender - even nationality.

I'm going to step out on a limb here, and say that I believe that to follow Christ means to make space for everyone, even if that means my comfortable, middle class lifestyle needs to be compromised. Christ came to create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace - so says our scripture. This peace is to reconcile different groups to God and to one another, ending hostility. We need to stop building walls that keep out refugees who are fleeing for their lives. We need to stop separating families with walls, keeping children from their parents as they seek amnesty. We need to work towards humane treatment of the least of these. While this is front page news, as President Trump continues to push for funding for an actual wall - this is not new. Republican and Democratic administrations have built walls of all sorts - walls of bureaucracy, walls of intolerance, walls that lead to death, separation, and inhumane treatment of people looking for safety.

Political theorist Wendy Brown says walls are a response to deep existential anxiety. Our desire for walls signifies our national sense of

impotence in the face of globalization. Walls are our grasping at keeping control - a control that is slipping away as the world continues to change.³

We are currently in the third of a 4 Sunday series from Mennonite Church USA which encourages us to renew our 3 fold commitment to
Follow Jesus;
Witness to God's Peace
And Experience Transformation.

This Sunday's focus statement on peace is printed at the top of the bulletin. It reminds us that according to the prophet Micah and other prophets, worship of God is empty without the presence of justice. We have an obligation to care for our neighbors. What are we doing to seek justice?

In Jesus, God was given a face and a heart that we could see. God became someone we could love. As the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas said, the only thing that really converts people is "the face of the other." When we receive and empathize with the face of the "other" (especially the suffering face), it leads to transformation of our whole being.

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We are all Sneeches. We all have moments when we have felt marginalized, left out, unseen - like those Sneeches on the beaches with no stars on their bellies. I'm guessing most of us know the pain of being an outsider. And we, especially those of us who are white, middle class, American born, have a responsibility to remove barriers. We are the star bellied Sneeches too. And to change that, a first step is to notice that barriers even exist.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/opinion/sunday/border-wall-immigration-trump.html>

⁴ Rohr, Richard. "The Face of the Other". 1/31/19. Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation.

November 9, 1989 a new word entered the German vocabulary: “Mauerspechte” - Wall woodpeckers. it’s a term for people who used hammers and picks to knock away chunks of the Berlin wall.⁵

How might we, today, become Mauerspechte? Wall woodpeckers? How do we claim hammers and picks to knock away chunks of the walls in our personal lives, our community and our country?

This requires something of us. It means living into a new way of being. It is taking on the suffering of Christ. This is the hard work of tearing down walls. This is the hard work of getting to know the invisible among us. This is the hard work of forging relationships with those who view the world differently than we do. This is the work of Christ - undermining the walls that divide until we come together as sisters and brothers of the one who is our peace.

I struggle to know what it looks like, in practical terms, for me, for us, and that leaves me feeling frustrated, not knowing what to do, and so I can easily fall back into not looking for the small changes that I can make. So here is one way, a small yet potent way, to live into this call of Christ. This week, I invite you to join me in “seeing no stranger”. Meaning that we see everyone as connected to us -brothers and sisters. When driving and annoyed at another driver - see them not as a stranger, but someone with a story. When walking the streets of State College, or in the library, where you might see someone who looks like they don’t live in a permanent home

⁵ <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/berlin-wall>

- see no stranger. Take a moment and see them as a person with a story, just like you. If you have the time and energy, maybe ask them about themselves. When in the classroom, the office, waiting for your children, standing in line.

Look around you. See no stranger, and let's see, together, if we can "seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God."

May it be so. Amen.