

Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 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, so 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.

Peace and the Dividing Wall

When Ash and I started dating, I knew he was an avid Yankees fan. Now, this would have been around 2002 or

2003, so my beloved Red Sox had not yet broken "the curse." I thought we'd be fine as a couple, due the fact that I held out so much hope for the Sox to break their losing streak, only to be disappointed by a never-ending winning streak for the Yankees. But in 2004, the team's luck changed. The Yankees had been three games up in the American League Championship Series, but Boston made a miraculous comeback and swept the last four. After that, it turned out, the Series itself was pretty dull. The St. Louis Cardinals were the NL champs and they had the best regular-season record in the majors, but in the series, their pitching was weak and their batting was worse. The Sox won the first three games handily. By the fourth, the Sox were playing like they won the Series every year. Johnny Damon led off with a homer that smashed into the St. Louis bullpen and it was uphill for my beloved Sox for the next eight innings. They stormed the field, fireworks burst into the air, and the fans went wild! "This," wrote a columnist for the Globe, "is what it must have felt like in 1918."

And then, the first "dividing wall" of our marriage emerged. I went on to attend seminary at Boston University School of Theology, and you just didn't even wear a Yankees hat in Boston. Ash actually came to visit me once and I made him wear a different hat. He was on my side of the dividing wall, so to speak, so he had to play by my rules. In 2007 when the Sox won the series again, I joined my neighbors in Roxbury cheering and singing at the top of my lungs. I may have even called Ash to gloat! When we got married, I thought it would be cute for our groom's cake at the rehearsal dinner to reflect this "house divided," but we didn't go that far. And now, after a few more pennants, I am pleased to

announce that Ash, for the most part, has come over. He's seen the light, and left the dark side.

This type of dividing wall is a small, seemingly insignificant example that won't lead to the dissolution of a marriage, I know. Not so with those dividing walls which are especially high these days for we do, in fact, seem to be divided by so very many things which matter. The issues being addressed in the powerful words before us now were written for a specific circumstance --- how Gentile Christians would or should be welcomed. Even so, one does not have to think too hard to come up with the painful things which divide us today, many of which have profound bearing on who we are as Church.

For instance:

We categorize ourselves and one another
by race,
by gender,
by class,

We are deeply aware of our differences in
political party
and theological position
and church denomination.

And the wall seems to grow only higher as too much of the time, many of us listen only to those who already agree with us, afraid of being tainted or convinced or proven wrong, perhaps. As a result, we do not allow our positions and therefore our hopes and dreams --- indeed, our very lives, to be refined by the fires of simple conversation back and forth.

There is so very much that divides us that we may even find ourselves hesitant to bring up the controversial, fearful that our false sense of peace will be disrupted.

Our Wednesday prayer and devotion group just finished working through a devotional called “How to love those we disagree with.” Quickly, one of our attendees wanted to switch that title around, stating, “How do we disagree with those we love.” And we did that. Because at the very beginning of our Christian lives, the call from Jesus is to love one another, right? So, when we shift our perspective in such a simple way, we see that we can speak softly, in truth and love, to points that we disagree on. The last devotion in the plan asked a few really important questions:

What if..

- We exhibited patience?
- We chose not to be offended?
- We quit taking everything so personally?
- We changed the degrading way we talk to others?
- We focused on what we did have in common?
- We chose the big picture?

She began this train of thought with a really important statement: We can *pre-decide* that we’re going to choose people over policies and relationships over rules. We can indeed choose the big picture, the idea that God so loved the whole world, that he moved into the neighborhood and dwelt among us in grace and truth, to show us what true unconditional love looks like.

Oh, how we need to hear that. And Paul knew that the Ephesians did too. The entire Ephesian church was on the outside. Paul reminds them of what they were—Gentiles, aliens, the uncircumcised, not welcome in this house. And

then tells them that Jesus breaks down the dividing wall and makes peace. That's some serious revelation right there, friends.

Peterson puts it this way:

Jesus brings us home, Jesus brings us together, Jesus breaks down hostility, Jesus re-creates us as a unified humanity, Jesus reconciles all of us to God. Peace is complex and many-layered. A lot of action goes into making peace—and Jesus *is* the action.

If we want to really grow up, and practice resurrection, I believe it starts with the church leading the way in breaking down dividing walls. But how do we do that? How are we called to talk about so many matters which threaten to divide? How might we rely on the certain truth that "Jesus is our peace" and the promise that what divides us has already been broken down in him? Is it possible that it is not my job, not your job, to remove the bricks from the wall because Jesus has already done so? Is it possible that all we have to do is walk through the opening which Jesus has already created for us? Certainly, that is what these words to the Ephesians seem to say.

Remember that Paul referred to himself as the "Apostle to the Gentiles." Being a Gentile was the 1st century version of being "un-churched," "un-welcome," "not-worthy," however you might describe a person that doesn't belong in your club. And yet, Paul went to this place Ephesus and founded and built a church of complete outsiders. It would take some time for the Council of Jerusalem to occur and welcome those "uncircumcised" into the family. Paul's letter to the Galatians is in the midst of his debates with other Jewish-Christians who stood squarely on the side of the Law: These grown Gentiles *have* to abide by our rules. To that, Paul said: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in

Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you *are* Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

If we really want to practice resurrection, we have to wrap our heads around this idea that we are meant to be a church of peace, unity, and purity. We are meant to be participants in the peace-making, but Jesus has already broken down those walls, friends! Who are we to build them back up? Christ has done the work of making two become one.

This reconciliation comes through the blood of Christ. Behind this statement lies the upside-down idea that such uniting of humanity was won not through the blood of conquest and victory, but through the blood of defeat. Where the unity sought in the Roman world came through conquest and uniformity to Rome's ways, the victory of God comes so differently that it is unrecognizable to the world. Rome's triumph over Christ was their own defeat. It's not that Christ defeated them, it's that in their defeat of Christ, they show themselves still remaining under the ways that lead to death and have always led to death since Cain killed Abel. Through death to the ways that lead to death -- in blood -- God in Christ has brought an end to those ways and raised up a people who die with Christ to witness to reconciliation and unity in Christ.

When Jesus tells us that the peacemakers are blessed, near the heart of God, and will be called children of God, he's letting us know that the work has been done, friends. As we grow up in Christ, our call is to not create more work. We must love one another. We must practice resurrection by participating in the work of peace-making. We must recognize that the table of our Lord is

so big and vast that *everyone* has a seat, because of the wall breaking that Jesus has done. So as we grow up in Christ, let us be makers of peace, and participate in that work alongside our God. Then, we are really being the church. Amen.