

WGUMC August 19, 2018 Ephesians 2:11-22  
“Breaking Through the Wall”

They were saying to each other, “Things are not the way they used to be. We should know. We were here first. And we remember back then how everyone was family. We were such a tight community. But then these other people started coming in. And let me tell you they are never going to fit in. They look different. They speak with strange accents. They are breaking the rules. They eat food we would never eat. They do things we would never do. They are destroying our whole way of life. And what’s worse, there’s going to come a time when there are more of them than there are of us. We have to put a stop to this.”

You might think I had been watching a certain news channel last week and listening to one of the commentators say “the America we know and love doesn’t exist anymore.” That person was lamenting the “massive demographic shifts” that have been “foisted upon the American people,” changes that “none of us ever voted for and most of us don’t like.” [Laura Ingraham on Fox News]

But no, I wasn't watching TV. I was just using my imagination to listen in on some commentators on the Jesus movement in Ephesus almost 2,000 years ago. Among Jesus followers, the Jewish contingent was already shrinking and Gentile numbers were rapidly growing. And those "massive demographic shifts" being "foisted upon" the church were making some members feel mighty uncomfortable.

The tension came to a head over the issue of circumcision. The Circumcision Party insisted that everyone who followed a Jewish Jesus must follow the Jewish law. That meant that adult male converts had to be circumcised before they were baptized. They argued that "if you're not circumcised, you're not a real Christian." That's like saying, "if you're not Northern European, you're not a real American."

As you can imagine, that wasn't convincing for a lot of Gentile men. Fortunately for them, Paul had been telling guys, "Relax,

uncross your legs. You don't have to submit to the knife. In Galatians, he said, "For freedom, Christ has set you free." [Gal 5:1]

Good for them, but for everyone else, freedom can be frightening. Change is threatening, and so people were retreating into the old ways of thinking about who is clean and unclean, who is acceptable and unacceptable. And brick by brick, they kept on building a wall of fear and prejudice and suspicion and righteous indignation.

That prompted not Paul but more likely a disciple of Paul to write a letter to call all the members of the Jesus movement back to Jesus. That seems to be the perennial task of the church, doesn't it? And we haven't been so good at it. Because it's always easier to follow rules than it is to follow our Redeemer. We've been so obsessed with defining who's in and who's out, we would rather draw boundaries than cross them as Jesus did. We would rather build walls than tear them down as Jesus set out to do. Because we

are always letting our prejudice get the best of us, we are always needing to get back to Jesus.

That is especially true today. There may not be a physical wall between us and Mexico—I suspect there will never be—but we are seeing walls spring up to divide up our communities, slicing and dicing our society in multiple ways every day. Maybe not since the Civil War, have we Americans been more desperate to hear what the letter of Ephesians has to say: “...he is our peace.”

In his life, Jesus came proclaiming peace to those who were far off (Gentiles) and peace to those who were near (Jews). But not only to them. In fact, Jesus came proclaiming peace to everyone, including a whole lot of folk who had long been considered “aliens and strangers to the promise” “with no hope and without God in the world.” Jesus came especially for them.

So if we want to get back to Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the church must proclaim peace. Peace to LGBTQ folk as well as heterosexual folk. Peace to womenfolk as well as menfolk. Peace to

black folk as well as white folk. Peace to immigrants and refugees as well as native born. Peace to those who live in cardboard boxes as well as those who live in castles. Peace to Muslims as well as Christians. Peace to our political enemies as well as to the members of our political party. Peace to our allies as well as the Russians, the Chinese, North Koreans and Iranians. Peace to animals and plants and mountain and rivers as well as people. Peace to the whole cosmos (we don't need star wars!) as well as this planet.

But this peace I'm talking about is not just the absence of war. In Isaiah, it's when the wolf lives with the lamb and the lion eats straw like the ox. [11:6] In Micah, it's when everyone sits under their own vines and their own fig trees and no one makes them afraid. [4:4] In the Psalms, it is the kissing cousin of justice. "righteousness and peace will kiss each other." [85:10] For Jesus, it is the end result of a healing process: "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace." [Luke 8:48]

And for his followers, Jesus is our peace, because he put his own body on the line to make peace. In his own flesh, he brought all the warring tribes together. When he died, all our rebellion against God and all our crimes against humanity, died, too. None of it has any ultimate power anymore because our love of power has already been overcome by the power of his love.

What is left? After all, Jesus left, and the work of the kingdom was not finished yet. He still needs a body here on earth, so he drafted us. (Imagine that!) The Church is the Body of Christ and Christ is our last best hope for peace in the world today, which is why I want to cry when I think about what we have done to his body! Every time we exclude this group or that group, it is like cutting off a limb or ripping out a vital organ. We are all members of the body, so the foot can't say to the hand, "I'm better than you." The ear can't say to the nose, "I have no need of you." The lungs can't say to the pancreas, "You are 'incompatible with Christian teaching.' We don't want you."

A fully functioning Body of Christ needs all of our bodies and all of our stories. To be a recognizable image of the all-loving God, we need all of our lives and all of our loves. I'm still waiting for the Church to be the Body of Christ.

The only reason I'm still here today is that I keep seeing glimpses of it. I saw it in my first parish in Filer, Idaho. Twenty-four years old, single, and still nursing wounds from all my feminist fights in seminary at Duke in North Carolina, I saw it in a congregation of conservative farmers and red-necked ranchers who took me patiently, graciously under wing and trained me up to be a pastor who loves all people, whether or not I see things from their perspective.

I saw it when I was back in graduate school, and I took a job as interim pastor for Golden Gate Metropolitan Community Church, a struggling mostly gay congregation in Noe Valley. Among its members were several professional women from the East Bay, homeless men living in the Tenderloin, recovering addicts and active

alcoholics, two survivors of a cult that practiced ritual abuse on children, and a disabled Vietnam War vet, straight as an arrow, but who along with his sister and niece felt right at home with all these misfits. All of this brokenness, yet I had never seen the Body of Christ look so beautiful.

In the six months that I was privileged to be their pastor, they taught me what inclusion looks like. They taught me what grace and strength and love and compassion and faithfulness and forgiveness and service and sacrifice look like. In short, they showed me what Jesus looks like. They loved Scripture so much that they read all four lectionary texts each week. They loved Jesus so much that they had communion every Sunday. They had a tradition of taking pieces of the bread home with them to give to whomever might need it that week. After sharing the peace of Christ with one another, they shared a piece of Christ with their neighbor. And there was never any Jesus left over.



I want that peace for each one of you. I want you to experience that kind of radical inclusion. I want you to know that you belong to the Body of Christ and to the family of God. And I want you to feel the love that you can't live without. So whatever wall is keeping you out or cutting you off from that love—whether it's prejudice or bigotry or scars from your family or justifiable anger at the church's long and sordid history or plain old oppositionality—whatever wall is keeping you out, Christ wants to break it down and bring you in. He wants to say to you, “While you're here on this earth, welcome to my heaven.”

I like to say I'm a runner, though I use the term loosely these days. But I'm out on the trails three times a week so I know about walls. You are running and panting and think you are about to die. You're going to hit the wall, but somehow by the grace of God you keep going. Then all of a sudden you break through. Now magically it feels like you could run forever. Friends, that's what it feels like

when you break through the wall of fear and prejudice and plunge into the love and joy and peace of Jesus Christ.

So Willow Glen United Methodist, listen up: You've been running, panting for too long, now it's time to break through. Don't let the politics of this present moment wear you down. Don't let the hatred and anger push you away. Don't let the fear get hold of you. Just get the love of Jesus inside you and those walls will come tumbling down. [sing: Christ Has Broken Down the Wall]