

WGUMC July 26, 2015 "The Power of God and Peace"  
Ephesians 2:11-22

Looking at the Middle East today, has peace ever seemed farther away? From Libya to Lebanon, from Israel to Eritrea, from Syria to Sudan, there are massive walls of hostility everywhere we look.

Ephesians says that Christ came over 2,000 years ago to break down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, but wouldn't you know: the Israeli government has put it back up. Over 400 km long and not yet finished, the wall that separates the West Bank from Israel has been called a security fence by the Israelis and an Apartheid Wall by the Palestinians. Either way, it is a "wall of shame," and it stands as a symbol of the enduring hostility between Jews and Gentiles, between Israelis and Palestinians. And that wall poses a very challenging question for us: Does the God we worship through Jesus Christ have the power to take down that wall and make peace in our world?

Let's start with what is peace. Ephesians says that Jesus is our peace. But what can that mean in a world that has been almost constantly at war ever since he came? Is peace just a between-the-ears kind of thing? Is peace a Buddha-like detachment from all the conflict and violence in our world? Or is peace nothing more than our final exit from it? These definitions may make peace seem more attainable, but they won't make our world more livable. Besides, that isn't how the Bible talks about peace.

The letter to the Ephesians is talking about peace as the opposite of hostility, namely the hostility that existed between the Jews and Gentiles in the time of the early church. The letter says: "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." [Eph 2:14] So, peace in this passage is not just a spiritual reality. It has very clear implications for the social body.

"He is our peace" is a statement of social policy regarding how Jews and Gentiles ought to relate to one another in the Church. And by unpacking that phrase and what it meant for Christians in the first century, we might discover what it could mean for us in the twenty-first century.

In this passage, we hear that Christ has broken down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. And we learn that the wall is the law. Jews have it. Gentiles don't. So it becomes a wall between them, with Jews on the inside and Gentiles on the outs. Now the text says that Christ has broken down the wall by abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances. [Eph 2:15] But as my Jewish husband will tell you, this is a tremendously difficult and dangerous passage for Jews, and let me tell you why.

To begin with, why does the author of Ephesians talk about "abolishing the law" when Jesus himself says, in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to

abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill." [Mt 5:17] Here we have a clear contradiction that is begging for an interpretation.

The safest thing that we Christians can do when we run into a difficult passage like this one is to refer back to Christ. In other words, we use the life and teachings of Jesus as our lens through which we try to understand problematic passages in the Bible. And if we do that, then we have to keep in mind what Jesus says about the law, or else we will build back up the wall that he took down.

Unfortunately, that is not how this passage has traditionally been read. Both Catholics and Protestants have tended to use this letter to interpret the words of Jesus rather than using Jesus to interpret this letter. But that can have disastrous consequences. Look at the Inquisition and the events in Europe leading up to the Holocaust and you'll see

how "abolishing the law" can easily become a campaign to abolish the Jews, as well.

Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. And so we have to understand this passage in a different way. I propose that we understand "abolish the law" to mean that Jesus came to abolish the idea that the law could be used to divide the insiders from the outsiders. When it comes to the covenant with God and all its blessings and promises, I look at Jesus, and I have to believe that it has always been God's will to include everyone, Jews and Gentiles, the in-laws as well as the out-laws.

As my husband likes to explain it, the law is a blessing to Jews because it is the way that Jews gain access to the grace of God. By following the law, they enter into a living relationship with God. The law is almost like a sacrament for them.

But what about those to whom the law has not been given, the Gentiles? How do we gain access to God? One way is through Jesus. Yes, he came to fulfill the Jewish law. But the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus didn't come only for Jews. Jesus came because God so loved THE WORLD. [John 3:16] And through that love, Gentiles can have the same access to God through grace that Jews have through the law.

The love of Christ levels the playing field, so to speak. It gives to Jews and Gentiles a spiritual equality. Or as Ephesians puts it, Christ creates in himself one new humanity in place of two, thus making peace. [Eph 2:15]

And that isn't the only dividing wall that Christ has broken down. Paul says that in Christ, "there is no longer Jew or Greek [but also] there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." [Galatians 3:28] So Christ breaks down all kinds of distinctions we like to make between the rich and the poor, black and

white, men and women, gay and straight. We are spiritual equals, because we all have the same access to God that the Jews do, thanks to Jesus Christ.

By giving us equal access to God, Christ can give us inner peace and with inner peace, we can make interpersonal peace. But is that enough? The question remains, is God in Christ really powerful enough to help us make international peace?

I sometimes feel bad about what God has to work with. For we haven't always acted as if we really believed that Christ is our peace. Over the centuries, Christians have gone on crusade, appointed inquisitors, burned witches, killed heretics, launched pogroms, segregated churches, bombed abortion clinics and burned the Quran. All of these things have been done in the name of Christ by people who have never understood this passage or this peace.

Too often, Christians have, in the words of Ephesians, acted like "strangers to the covenants of promise, a people

without hope and without God in the world." [Eph 2:12] And when we get in that place, it's much easier to build a wall than to take one down. It's much easier to rally the troops for war than to train hearts and minds to make peace. The problem today is that, on the world stage, we are more likely to take up arms than we are to take up the cross.

We really need someone to show us a new way. Thank God, we have a new pope! Everywhere he goes, Francis wants to break down another dividing wall. He has washed the feet of prisoners, kissed the disabled, blessed the poor, challenged the rich, preached compassion for gays, inclusion for divorced and remarried Catholics, and most recently, protection for the planet.

In my mind, Francis is acting on his faith that God indeed has the power to make peace in our world, but we must be the instruments of it. We must be willing to sacrifice ourselves for



peace as much and more as we have for war. And we don't have to be a pope to use our power.

Have you ever heard of Dr. Tom? He's a Catholic missionary from New York who is serving as the only resident doctor in the Nuba mountains of Sudan, a region with a population of over 500,000 people.

Almost every day, the Sudanese government drops bombs on civilians in that region, trying to defeat an armed rebellion. So Dr. Tom removes shrapnel, amputates limbs, and delivers babies, all without electricity, running water, or a telephone. He does his best using Civil War-era treatments.

Dr. Tom is not in it for the money or the glory. "I've been given benefits from the day I was born," he says. "A loving family. A great education. So I see it as an obligation, as a Christian and as a human being, to help."

The People in the Nuba Mountains will never forget Dr. Tom, and they are praying that he never dies. One Muslim chief

called him Jesus Christ, because Christ healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, made the lame walk, and that's what Dr. Tom does every day. Not to mention, breaking down a few walls. [Nicholas Kristof, *The New York Times*, June 27, 2015]

Speaking of walls, right now, there are Christian Peacemaker Teams in Hebron, dealing every day with a wall of shame. Every day, they escort Palestinian children to and from school to keep them safe. But they have to pass through Israeli settlements, and they endure daily harassment from the settlers and the soldiers and sometimes, physical assault. They are sacrificing for peace what others sacrifice for war.

Finally, we have Alex Awad, United Methodist missionary and Palestinian pastor who also teaches at a Bible college in East Jerusalem. His father was killed in the war in 1948 when the State of Israel was established. Alex got his college education in the United States, became a naturalized citizen,

and married an American. But in 1979, God called him out of his comfort zone to return to Palestine and work for peace.

Are any of these brave Christians making a difference in the Middle East? I believe so. I believe that God does have the power to make peace in our world because God has the power to change hearts. And that is the only way peace is ever made: one heart at a time. The progress of peace is agonizingly slow. But the way of peace is very powerful. And if enough of us followed it, no wall could stop us. As Robert Frost says: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants it down!" That something is God in Christ. So it is up to the followers of Christ to not lose hope and do whatever we can to help Jews and Muslims take down that wall!

