

Church of the Crossroads
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 23, 2006
Neal MacPherson

BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Psalm 72
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34

In our seminary preaching class, way back when, we were told that it would be best to refrain from using the words and actions of family members as sermon illustrations. On occasion, I have broken the rule. More than once in a sermon I have recalled the time when my nephew Sean was a little boy and was asked by his grandmother if he wanted more dinner. Replied Sean, “No, grandma, enough is all I want.” I will now break the rule again, and report the time when my 3 year-old grandson Iain found himself at a church gathering. Seeing that Iain was out of the sight of his mother and grandparents, Judy Rantala asked him, “Iain, where is your family?” Iain looked around, spread his arms wide so that he took in the entire assembled community, and replied, “This is my family.”

We might all do the same. We might spread our arms wide, so that everyone is in our embrace, and say, “This is my family.” How fortunate our children are to have such a loving, caring extended family, and how fortunate we are, as well. To know one another by name, and to belong to such a diverse, interesting, amazing community of persons is the best antidote I know to the modern human experience of aloneness.

The modern experience of aloneness has become so common in our society that it poses a threat to life itself. Unless we make our way through life together, we are putting ourselves at risk. Inevitably, without one another, we will experience life as fractured and incomplete. What a gift, then, it is to belong to a faith community in which we can be brothers and sisters, one to another.

We do not know who wrote the Letter to the Ephesians. It could have been the Apostle Paul or someone writing in his style. Whoever wrote the letter declares that in the church we have been brought together in Christ,

joined together as one holy temple in God, built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. The writer has in mind the way that the early Christian community and movement evolved to include both Jew and Gentile, both those near to the covenant and those who were far off. In the new covenant, brought into being by the death of Jesus, the two, once divided and hostile towards one another, were made one. Writes the author of the letter, “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.” (Ephesians 2:14)

The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians had in mind Jew and Greek. The wall the writer had in mind could well have been the wall in the Jerusalem Temple that divided the Court of the Jews from the Court of the Gentiles. In Christ, that wall was no more.

In our context, it is not Jew and Greek. It is gay and straight, young and old, man and woman, those who have more and those who have less, those who have one gift and those who have another gift, one challenge or another challenge, those who have come from the mainland U. S. and those who were born and raised here, those who grew up Pentecostal or Congregationalist (or Catholic or Lutheran or Methodist or secularist), those who are Asian American and haole, African American and *kanaka maoli*, those who have lots of formal education and those who have a high school education, those who believe that Jesus was divine, and those who believe that Jesus was no more divine than any of us, those who are Democrat and those who are Republican and those who are Independent. And we could go on and on. Somehow, by the grace of God, surely, we have become one in Christ and manage, most of the time, to regard one another as sisters and brothers in faith. We belong to a community where there may be a fence or two, but no walls; a community where differences get in the way of community every now and then, but not in any lasting way, a community that has not experienced hostility, even back stage hostility, for a very long time, although there are times when we need to work at the task of getting along with one another.

I am grateful for our community of faith. Even when we do not quite live up to the vision of the Letter to the Ephesians, we know that we must quickly and consciously move ever towards it.

My friends, it is from the sense of community we experience with one another that we view the world around us, with its deep divisions between rich and poor, those in power and those out of power, those who take one side of a cultural war and those who take another side, those who belong to one nation and those who belong to another. We view the world around us and note the deep seated hatred and hostility between peoples, and say, “Why, if we can be the way we are in this community of faith, cannot the peoples of the world learn to get along with one another?” It is a good question to which there seems to be no answer.

Reinhold Niebuhr had a way of putting it that still rings true today. He said that as human beings, and by extension, as small communities, we have a possibility of living peaceful and moral lives, but when we go beyond the confines of the small community, when we become a collective rather than a community, we inevitably will descend into hostility and immorality. His book was called *Moral Man in Immoral Society*. Later in his life, Niebuhr said he should have called his book *Immoral Man in an Even More Immoral Society*. Niebuhr, of course, was not afraid to point to the reality of sin that operates in each of us, certainly, but even more so when we get together as collectives and nations.

There is one thing we do know. From our experience of living in harmony, of living in a community in which walls have been broken down, it disturbs us greatly to witness the hostility and warfare so prevalent in our world. It disturbs us and upsets us because coming from the community we know and love we do have a perspective on the world that carries with it a measure of insight. For example, we know that terrorist groups such as Hezbollah which operate out of a deep seated hatred would see an end to their hatred if Israel would decide to get out of the occupied territories, and allow the Palestinians to live in peace and unafraid. We have known for a very long time that there will be no peace in the Middle East until the Palestinian issue is resolved. Why cannot President Bush see that? Why cannot Condoleezza Rice see that? One can hope that our leaders might carry the words of Psalm 72 in their pockets, the psalm that prays for rulers who redeem the lives of the weak and needy from oppression and violence. In light of our readings from Jeremiah and the Gospel of Mark, may our leaders be shepherds who gather the sheep together and not scatter them.

President Bush said just a day or two ago that his administration’s diplomatic efforts would focus on finding a strategy for confronting

Hezbollah and its Syrian and Iranian backers. “Secretary Rice will make it clear that resolving the crisis demands confronting the terrorist group that launched the attacks and the nations that support it.” Secretary Rice herself said that she ruled out a quick cease-fire as a false promise. Meanwhile, U. N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said that he is afraid of a major humanitarian disaster in Lebanon.

Why did President Bush not add that his administration would also focus on Israel’s continued occupation of Palestinian territories? That is the root cause of the conflict, indeed the growth of terrorism throughout the region. That is what we cannot help but see from the perspective of our own faith community. For we have this image that in Christ the walls are broken down. And the wall that Israel has constructed in order to preserve and protect that Palestinian lands that it occupies is surely a wall that must be dismantled if there is to be peace in the Middle East and throughout the world.

What, then, are we to do? Sometimes, we feel so overwhelmed by all the violence and enmity in the world that we can barely move. Let us return to Reinhold Niebuhr and the famous prayer he wrote that so reflects his theology. Used for decades now in twelve step programs, the prayer begins with these words: *God grant me serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.* There are some things we cannot change, and yet there are things we can change. We can persevere in our commitment to be the community the author of Ephesians describes, a community without walls, a community at one in Christ. For unless we are what we preach, there can be no hope for the world. And we can continue to speak and write and march on behalf of a world in which every man, woman, and child may live in peace and unafraid. And yes, we can pray, leaving the rest up to God, as Reinhold advised later in his prayer, when he said we must trust that God will make things right if we but surrender to God’s will.

Breaking down the walls. What a powerful image for us and for our world. We must never give up our hope for such a world, a world without walls, nor can we ever abandon our prayer that one day, by the grace of God, it may it be so. Amen.