

“Practicing Resurrection: As One in Christ”  
 (1<sup>st</sup> of 4 on the Letter to the Ephesians)  
 Delivered Sunday, May 8, 2011 (Communion)  
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Ephesians 2:11-22

Have you noticed how our attention has been directed at walls lately? Walls around a compound in Pakistan heroically penetrated by the elite United States Navy SEAL team; walls tragically swept away by tornadoes in Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia; walls that cannot hold back flood waters in Missouri and Tennessee. Closer to home – everywhere we go, there are fences and walls and other constructed barriers – all aimed at protecting something or someone inside, and keeping someone out.

We need walls: walls in our homes to protect us against wind and rain; partitions to separate spaces and improve organization and efficiency. But we also understand how walls, both literal and spiritual barriers, can lead to division, grief, and even violence. Every wall serves some purpose; but not every wall serves the purposes of God. (1)

The Letter to the Ephesians, addresses one of the primary and most difficult issues in the early church, and that pertained to walls. In the first century, as the Easter gospel of Jesus’ resurrection was spreading and taking hold in the hearts of believers, the early Christians had to contend with some mighty high walls. Huge barriers of faith and religious practice separated Judaism, emerging Christianity, and the pagan culture in which they both existed. Our scripture reading this morning addresses the two camps of the circumcised and the uncircumcised, which was about a whole lot more than a medical procedure. It was about the early Jewish Christians wearing in their flesh a sign of the Covenant – long ago made with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They considered themselves children of the covenant, a chosen race, freed from exile, liberated from slavery in Egypt, and bound together by the Torah. Gentiles, on the other hand, came into the Christian faith as converts, having not been bound to the tradition of living in covenant relationship with God. (2) The animosity between them was as fierce as we see today between religious factions in Iraq and Afghanistan, in Israel and Palestine – hence that horrible wall.

The writer to the Ephesians understands these historic divisions and the animosity; but the letter appeals to a new hope for unity by using the language of resurrection. The Gentiles in Ephesus are reminded – that at one time they were ... without Christ ... aliens in the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.” But things have changed; everything has changed in light of the resurrection! “Now ... in Christ Jesus they 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 between us.” No longer that high, separating wall, we are now “built together spiritually into a dwelling place of God.”

It is the mission of the church to practice this kind of resurrection hope and promise. We are no longer alienated, one from another, not based on race, not based on color, not based on class, not based on sexual orientation, not based on political persuasion, not based on how deep our roots in the faith are, or are not, or in the church of Jesus Christ. In him, these old walls have come down, uniting us as one.

My group of preachers from all over the country has been in close communication these days because one of the group, Charlie Durham, is pastor of First Presbyterian in Tuscaloosa. The sister of our Shandon member Nancy Roberts, is the associate pastor there. After the devastating tornadoes swept through town, Lou Ann spent the hours driving the church bus to transport injured people to hospitals. Charlie took his chainsaw to neighborhoods where church members needed help getting felled trees off their houses. Church members, who were not dealing with a crisis of their own, reached out to complete strangers to help in any way they could.

While all that was going on down in Alabama, our friend Jon Walton in New York City sent us a poem from another era of seeking unity across the divisions we humans have constructed. Written by Langston Hughes, that wonderful African American poet, novelist and playwright of the Harlem Renaissance, it's entitled “Daybreak in Alabama.”

When I get to be a composer  
 I'm gonna write me some music about  
 Daybreak in Alabama  
 And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it  
 Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist  
 And falling out of heaven like soft dew.  
 I'm gonna put some tall tall trees in it  
 And the scent of pine needles  
 And the smell of red clay after rain  
 And long red necks  
 And poppy colored faces  
 And big brown arms  
 And the field daisy eyes  
 Of black and white black white black people  
 And I'm gonna put white hands  
 And black hands and brown and yellow hands  
 And red clay earth hands in it  
 Touching everybody with kind fingers  
 And touching each other natural as dew  
 In that dawn of music when I  
 Get to be a composer  
 And write about daybreak  
 In Alabama.

Black, white, black, brown, yellow, red clay earth hands – touching everyone with kind fingers is a way of practicing resurrection. Reaching across those barriers that have, in an earlier time, caused division and hostility, and finding in Jesus Christ a peace that has broken down the dividing wall.

“Remember,” the writer to the Ephesians says to those early Gentile Christians. Remember what your pre-church life was like. Remember how you were defined entirely by what you were not by hammering home seven negatives: “Gentiles, that is not-Jews, were uncircumcised, without Christ, aliens to the commonwealth of God, strangers to the covenants, having no hope, godless.” “Remember what that transition was like when you crossed the threshold into the church, the transition from exclusion to inclusion? Remember the surprise of being an insider to God and God’s revelation after being an outsider? Remember this well, for church cannot be comprehended by negatives, by what it is not, and neither can you.”

When we remove all those negatives from our vocabulary of what “church” means, Ephesians fills in the gap by replacing them with the word “peace.” Five distinct actions of Jesus add up to peace: 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. Eugene Peterson writes, “Church is the place where men and women cannot be depersonalized into abstractions such as insider and outsider, in-group and out-group, friends and enemies. The evidence? Our worship: Baptism, in which we are personally named in the Name of the Trinity, and Communion, where peace is inextricably identified with sacrifice – the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, given to us to focus, clarify, and bring us into participation with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who is our peace.” (3)

The place – where the peace Jesus intends for us and for our world in all its diversity – is most evident here at the communion table. Just as each grain of wheat loses its form and takes upon itself the common body of the bread, so we who partake of it – lose human distinctions that divide us. Just as the drops of juice lose their own form, so it should be with us if we are nourished by this sacrament. We partake of – one bread, one drink, and by the peace of Christ – we become one body working together for the common good, for those who are far off, and those who are near.

AMEN.

#### NOTES

(1) Kevin Baker, “Wrecking Crew,” *Christian Century*, 7/11/06, p. 21.

(2) This description of the early Christian conflict between Jew and Gentile is paraphrased from words of Jon Walton, “*To Those Far Away and Near at Hand*,” 7/20/03, First Presbyterian, New York City.

(3) Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, p. 125.