

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“On Tearing Down Walls”

Ephesians 2:13-22

It's been said that gophers are good at building tunnels but people are good at building walls. And it's true. I've had gophers and I've seen walls. Take the most famous wall of all – the Great Wall of China. Begun in the 200's B.C., that wall was built to keep some northern tribes from invading China. And, in a very real way, it still symbolizes the isolation of China from the rest of the world. Or how about the Berlin Wall? Built by the Russians following World War II, it divided not only East Berlin from West, it came to symbolize the division between the eastern and western block countries that we knew as the cold war. Or think about the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Now revered as sacred, that wall was originally built by the Jews to keep the Gentiles out of the inner court around the Temple. On it there was a written warning that said that any Gentile that ventured beyond the wall would be killed at once. It would indeed seem that people really are good at building walls.

But as good as we are at that, we're even better at building mental, emotional and spiritual walls. We build walls based on race and color and age and sex and money and status and just about anything else you can think of. Even religion, in its worst form, can be such a wall.

But while we are good at building walls whether they be physical or mental or emotional or spiritual God is even better at tearing them down. Take Jericho for example. You know the story. The people of Jericho had built a big wall around their city that they thought would keep everyone else out and, in that, keep them safe. But God had other ideas. Working through a man named Joshua, God caused those walls to come tumbling down.

In a way, all earthly walls are really just poor imitations of a greater heavenly wall – a wall that Paul in our epistle lesson for today -- calls the “dividing wall of hostility.” That wall is the wall that divides us from God and from each other. It's the wall built by sin. The first brick in that wall was laid in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. And brick by brick, that wall has continued to be built down through the ages as man has continued to disobey. It's a wall that we cannot tear down. Only God can. And that's exactly what He did in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. Through Christ's life, death and resurrection, God tore down that dividing wall of hostility and cleared the way for all mankind to return to Him.

God didn't do this simply by overlooking sin which would be the spiritual equivalent of pretending that the Berlin Wall never existed but rather he tore it down brick by brick as Christ paid for each and every sin on the cross of Calvary. And now, in Christ, God stands ready to tear down the walls in our lives through the forgiveness of our sins.

You see, all those who believe and trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior have that forgiveness and, in that, enjoy the right relationship with God for which they were created in the first place. They enjoy that now and will continue to enjoy it for an eternity.

But just as importantly Paul says that all those who believe and trust in Jesus also enjoy a right relationship with others as well. It's as if God, after tearing down that dividing wall between us and Him used those bricks which once symbolized sin but now symbolize the forgiveness of sins, to build a new thing, a new building, if you will, a new building big enough for all, a new building called the Church.

For some, the Church is nothing more than a building – a physical building. But today's epistle lesson reminds us that it's a lot more than that. It's more than just a physical building, it's also a mental, emotional and spiritual building. It's, as Paul calls it, the very "household of God." More than a building, it's a household, a family, a family God continues to build up through His means of grace.

With Jesus as the cornerstone, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, the Church is one even though, to some, it appears to be divided, it is one because Jesus Christ is her head. As we sang a few moments ago in the hymn of the day, "The Church's One Foundation", we have but one Lord, one faith, one birth, one holy name we bless, we partake one holy food and we press on to one hope with every grace endured.

It's said that on a certain Pentecost during World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this to his parents from prison: "At the tower of Babel all the tongues of men were confounded and as a result they were divided since they couldn't understand each other any more. But now this confusion has been brought to an end by God for now in Christ we are united and we can understand each other because we all speak the same language. And the church is the place where this miracle happens over and over again."

On this seventh Sunday after Pentecost, God stands ready to perform yet another miracle in our lives. Remembering the wall of hostility between God and us that has been torn down through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, He would empower us to tear down any walls that continue to stand in the way of a right relationship with others as well. And as we repent and turn to Him in faith, it shall be so. In Jesus' name. Amen.