

The Dividing Wall of Hostility
Ephesians 2:11-22

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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The world is filled with walls that divide God's children.

The writer of Ephesians (we'll call him Paul, though the author is probably a disciple of Paul who wrote later) says it well: there is a dividing wall made by the bricks of our hostility. That wall is solid and high and divisive. There are so many walls casting such long, long shadows.

Paul talks about the deep rift that existed in his day between the Jew and the Gentile. He lifts a single name that bridges the wall between these people: Jesus.

14For [Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

Jesus is our peace, and Jesus breaks down the walls that divide us.

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This morning I'd like to tell five stories that underline where I've seen the dividing walls of hostility coming down.

1. — Last week, we said goodbye to our associate pastor. Eric's call to become our associate pastor a few years ago and his new call to the pastorate of the Presbyterian Church at Woodstock reminds me of how God equips and calls us to bear Christ's peace to the world. This Church has nurtured and been nurtured by 44-pastors, associate pastors, interim pastors, and parish associate pastors—all of whom were imperfect people whom God has perfectly used to chip away at the walls that divide. You have elected hundreds of elders to serve, and dozens of Amateur Preachers to preach, and committed Commissioned Lay Pastors to pastor. Since 1962 our senior high school kids, and since 1992 our senior citizens have led mission trips all over the country—from Otterville, Missouri, Seneca Nation, New York, and Sitka, Alaska, to Port Deposit, Maryland. These are NOT just statistics; these numbers, these trips represent real people who have labored to dismantle the walls that divide.

Where have you see the dividing walls of hostility coming down?

2. — Mindy Watts-Ellis and our CYF Team is bringing together our adults and children at Hessel Park for Sunday afternoons for some lunch, bible study, and holy play. Last week we hosted a contest. Players had to move 15 dried navy beans from one pie plate to another. It was a race. And how did you have to move those tiny, dried beans? With chopsticks! We encouraged one another. We laughed like crazy. We cheered. Noni Ledbetter won; she was the queen of the Great Navy Bean Migration.

And do you know what? The walls that divided members from visitors, natives from immigrants, children from adults, strangers from strangers—those walls began to tumble down.

Where have you see the dividing walls of hostility coming down?

3. — Last week I heard the novelist Nathan Englander describe a trip when he was a college student. The Berlin Wall had just come down. He and his friend had a frightening late night one night piling onto a train. The train was already full, and the compartment for which they had tickets was filled with sleeping immigrants. While these young men were having a college vacation, these homeless men and women were fleeing the cold war and were running for their lives, trying to cross through the iron curtain—the border from the East to the West. The Berlin Wall had opened up, but perhaps tomorrow, it would close. There was desperation in the air.

In another compartment, a family made room for the two college kids. The family didn't speak English. This refugee family, sensing that Nathan and his friend were hungry, offered them food. This family who had nothing, not only shared space with these college kids, they shared their food, and thereby they shared themselves.

I don't know if this family was Christian or Muslim or Taoist or Agnostic or Jew or what. But I know in that compartment in that train on that night, Jesus was in their midst. Walls were coming down.

Where have you see the dividing walls of hostility coming down?

4. — Your Spiritual Formation team is planning another “Faith in the Real World” series. In September, members of our church and community will be sharing their stories about how their faith motivates and informs what they do. One of our speakers this fall will be Bryant Seraphim, the Police Chief of Urbana. I had breakfast several days ago with the Chief. He knows all about dividing walls of hostility. He sees these walls in our community.

He shared this with me, and I asked his permission to share it with you:

By the time the police get involved in a situation in our community, tensions are boiling over. But whenever people like you or me get involved *earlier in the process*, he sees some of those hostile walls of hostility coming down before they are even constructed, when, for example, people help support women getting good prenatal care. And when people like you and me support Preschool programs like HEAD Start, those high walls get a little lower. DREAAM House is all about breaking down walls. Job training programs cut doorways and windows into old walls. The Courage Connection gives battered women, cowering behind walls, a break. SAFE House is in the business of knocking down the walls of addiction and low self-esteem.

Bryant Seraphim says it's better for us to break down those walls before the police are ever called to the scene.

Where have you see the dividing walls of hostility coming down? When's the last time you took a swing at one of those walls?

5. — From Cuba, the news is bleak. The walls are high. People are taking to the streets because people are starving. State salaries have gone up a little bit; a pastor used to make \$24 a month, now maybe a few dollars more. But the price of food has gone up five-times. Covid is swarming in Cuba; medical supplies are limited; treatments like the one our pastor friend Daniel Izquierdo needs have been put off for lack of supplies and drugs. We are praying, praying for our Sister Congregation in Luyano, Havana.

The Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba shared this statement with its churches and church partners on June 26th:^[1]

- The church: *Rejects all forms of violence, whether verbal, physical or in any of its expressions as a presumed way to solve conflicts.*

- The church: *Supports all initiatives, governmental or otherwise, that promote justice, equity and the rights of all people and creation, particularly those that defend the rights of sectors that have been discriminated against or silenced in the social arena.*
- The church: *prays to God that we may be agents of reconciliation, peace and love, fruits of the Spirit in whom we are and [in whom we] move.*

The Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba shared this statement on July 13th, 2021:

- *We affirm that the gospel we have been called to preach will always be good news for the world, justice and peace for "the least of these," and abundant life for all Creation. For this we will continue to work tirelessly.*

Our brothers and sisters in the Cuba church—our friends—are working tirelessly, but they are tired. *And Jesus is tired with them, working with them, walking with them, praying with them, standing with them.* And those walls are coming down.

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"[Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made [all] groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

Jesus' church, in Jesus' name, is in the business of knocking walls down by the grace of God. Every chance we get, we chip away at those walls that divide us. When we find arrogance, we offer humility. When we find anger, we offer kindness. When we find hate, we offer love. When we find self-centeredness, we offer service to those who hurt.

Because of God's grace, hostility and fear and apathy will not paralyze us. No more will we allow walls to block out the sun. Barriers will not keep us from shaking hands. Walls will not keep us from embracing a new day together, as brothers and sisters, as friends and neighbors.

The empty cross reminds us that just as death didn't have the final word, division and hostility won't, either. In the face of God's love, the walls that we insist on building to divide us cannot, will not stand, by the grace of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit:

THANKS BE TO GOD.

AMEN.

[1] We can say that we are a better church because we have exercised as never before the fruits of the Spirit: *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control"* (Gal 5:22), and although we have been physically distant [due to covid-isolation], we are now more *united in the bond of Christ's love* (Eph 4:3).