

July 22, 2018
9th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)
Sermon series: *Life in Christ*
Part 1: “Strangers brought near”
Ephesians 2:11-22
The Rev. Carenda Baker

On the eve of Aug. 13, 1961, it first appeared as a barbed wire fence, surprising residents on both sides the following morning. It became a guarded concrete barrier that physically and ideologically divided the city of Berlin. The Wall cut off West Berlin from virtually all of surrounding East Germany and East Berlin. The barrier included 302 guarded watch towers placed along 12 ft. high concrete walls, topped with barbed wire, gun emplacements and some 55,000 land mines. It was accompanied by a wide area (later known as the “death strip”) that contained anti-vehicle trenches. East German authorities officially referred to the Berlin Wall as the Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart, intended to guard its population from fascist elements conspiring to prevent the “will of the people” in building a socialist state in East Germany. The West Berlin city government sometimes called it the “Wall of Shame”, referring to the wall’s restriction on freedom of movement.

Those here of a certain age may remember a few words from President Ronald Reagan’s speech at the Brandenburg Gate of the Berlin Wall on June 12, 1987, at the height of the Cold War when he seized the moment to speak of freedom and peace: “General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Families had been separated for years by that wall. The first opening in the Wall was made two years later on Nov. 9, 1989. Demolition of The Berlin Wall began in June 1990 and was completed in 1992.

“*Something there is that doesn’t love a wall*”, begins Robert Frost’s poem, “*The Mending Wall*”. Frost describes the New England farmer’s job of patching up a rock fence in the spring after the ravages of snow and ice had broken it down during the winter. Together he and his neighbor, between whose properties the wall ran, patiently walked along together, one on each side, to repair it, putting the fence back together stone by stone. They have been at this spring ritual for many years. Yet this time it strikes the narrator of the poem differently, and he questions just why it is that they have the wall in the first place.

The narrator says: “It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down."

WALLS. They generally separate, fragment, isolate, and keep people apart. The intent is to provide security and safety, allowing us some little sense of comfort and protection. But walls often are built in response to differences, fear, and hostility. Walls are deemed necessary because of suspicion and mistrust of "the other".

The roots of the infant Christian Church were firmly planted in Judaism. Jesus and most of the disciples were Jews. One of the thorniest problems for the Church in its early days was what to do about the differences between non-Jews and Jews. Jews were the elect, the people with whom God made a covenant and promised a rich inheritance of land and generations of heirs. These were the ones instructed by God through the Torah how it was God intended for them, and wanted them to live. These were the ones God delivered from slavery, and led through the wilderness to a promised land. They were meant to be a separate and distinct community from the culture around them. Thus the Ten Commandments and those other rules about circumcision, ritual purity, and keeping kosher. Non-Jews, usually referred to as Gentiles did not have that same close bond with Yahweh, the God of the Jewish people. Non-Jews usually would have believed in and worshiped the gods of the culture in which they lived, or not believed in any gods at all.

There was deep enmity between Jews and non-Jews. So, it was nothing short of miraculous when both the apostles Peter and Paul had experiences that led them to openly welcome and begin to include Gentiles in the growing circle of Jesus' faithful followers. The wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile developed major cracks with the coming of Jesus. And then the wall began to shake from its very foundations through the work of Jesus' death and resurrection.

“Hostility itself was put to death through the cross”, is how the writer of the letter to the Ephesians puts it. What a powerful declaration! The wall of hostility, including the very hostility of the Roman empire that put Jesus to death, was being demolished. The walls of hostility would come crumbling, tumbling down through the power of the Holy Spirit as something new, the Church was being birthed.

“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.”

What does this mean? What does it mean that by coming to earth, incarnate in Jesus, the Almighty One got God’s holy self - killed? There isn’t anything much more brutal and hostile than crucifixion. How did Christ’s dying put an end to, put to death hostility?

By Jesus coming in peace to show and live a different way, God’s way of non-violent love. Because love is who God is. God is not retaliatory or vengeful. God is love.

How easily we forget this. We get drawn away from diligently learning to follow and live the way of love. We continue to be saturated with that other message – the same one with which Jesus contended, the one about the power of empire, and having dominion and control over others. That message continues to bombard us telling us so convincingly that the most important things in life are wealth and getting one’s own way. That whoever has the biggest pile of money and biggest stash of weapons to carry out the most damage and destruction wins. But wins what exactly? Sitting at the top of a heap of stuff all alone to survey destruction?

This narrative of empire breeds hostility, so there is bound to be hostility present if this is the narrative we believe and continue to accept as truth. But those categories of winner and loser do not appear in Scripture. These are a human construct. There is plenty in Scripture mentioning the mighty and haughty, and the abuse of power by those who rule over kingdoms. And there is a lot in Scripture about the meek and lowly, about the responsibility of God’s people to notice and take care of the vulnerable and needy, the least, last, lost, lonely and left out, about welcoming the “stranger and the alien” because God is always on the side of the weak and vulnerable. And all of us who are not of Jewish heritage, were at one point considered “the stranger and the alien”, those far off now brought near into the wide welcome of God’s open arms, evident in Jesus’ arms outstretched on the hard wood of the cross. Jesus died to end the enmity, to unite a humanity forever divided.

All human beings - no matter our race or ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, education, socioeconomic status, religion or non-religion, nationality, or political party affiliation – all of us seek three things. Love. Freedom. And abundant life – a life of meaning given back to God and lived for others.

And the God we have come to know in Jesus, the Christ has shown us the way to find those three things – love, freedom, and abundant life. By looking at Jesus' life we can see - this God of Love, is NOT safe, but is good. This God, our God, has chosen another way. The Way of Love.

So what then, about the walls with which we now live? The external walls of political policy and action based on threat, fear, division, greed and selfishness cannot ultimately stand because they do not promote God's agenda of love, freedom, and abundant life for ALL.

And what about the interpersonal walls which divide us from one another? Those walls erected in response to past hurts, resentments, misunderstandings, wrongly assumed motives attributed to others, ignorance, and pride – all those walls are meant to come tumbling down through the reconciling work of Christ. There is no place for, no need for those walls in the structure of the holy temple - that is the Christian community – us – because we are being built into the spiritual dwelling place of God.

We each also live with our own internal walls which keep us separated from God, from others and from our true selves. Some of those walls take the form of self-loathing, self-promotion, shame, false guilt, anxiousness, addictions, prejudice, a spirit of unforgiveness, unhealed pain – all these walls Jesus has broken down to bring us together in peace as God intended.

The God who created and loves each of us is not about putting up walls that divide and separate. That is not what life in God's kingdom looks like. God is about drawing people together into greater health and wholeness, deeper compassion and caring, into true shalom – the deep peace of all things being well, every aspect of life blooming with vibrancy and health for all.

Where Jesus through the power of the living Holy Spirit sends the walls a-tumbling down, God is present creating communities who share in the work of peacemaking, rather than peace-keeping. When the walls are about to come a tumbling down, faith communities are willing to support and stay with each other when we face conflict, rather than shut down, put up a wall and run from it. When the walls come a tumbling down, we are empowered to build bridges that span our differences and allow us to see

more clearly our common humanity. The common truth that each of us is made in God's image, and every one of us needs God and our neighbors.

Here is an invitation to do a bit of our own prayer work for living into the Way of Love. Prayer is one of those practices that helps us learn to live and walk Jesus' way of love. If you do not have a Book of Common Prayer at home, please borrow one from the church to use this week. If you need help buying a BCP of your own, please see me. There are two large print BCP's on the back table, so we can help you order your own large print to use at home.

Our Book of Common Prayer has a treasure trove of prayers toward the back of the book, in the section titled "Prayers and Thanksgivings". Please take a prayer book right now so you can see to what I'm referring. Beginning on p. 814 through p.841, there are six major sub-headings in the prayer section: prayers for the world, the church, national life, the social order, natural order, and family and personal life.

Here is a small discipleship challenge. This week, take five minutes each day to pick up a Book of Common Prayer (or pull it up online on your computer, tablet or phone) and look at one of those six sub-sections. Choose one prayer to pray. These prayers help us pray for all areas of life – family, the nation, creation, the social order, the church, and the world. The prayers are grounding and there is powerful benefit from offering our common prayer – prayers said in common with all the saints, living now and gone on to greater glory in life with God. It is *common prayer* that we offer in the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer and Compline. Our celebration of the Holy Eucharist is based on the ancient, common prayer of the Church.

Christ is our peace, and has broken down the dividing walls between us. We are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints, being built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Let's pray together now the prayer on p. 815 of The Book of Common Prayer – *For the Human Family*.

"O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."