

**All Brought Near**  
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Robert Frost wrote many years ago: “There is something that doesn’t like a wall...” That may be so, but we humans sure do have a funny fascination with walls. We may say that we don’t like them, we may say that we hate to see them go up, we may love it when they come tumblin’ down, like the old walls of Jericho. But there is something in us that does love a wall.

We remember walls like the Berlin Wall, which kept people from leaving East Berlin; we might also know of the wall in the Middle East that Israel put up to keep out terrorist attacks. But most of the walls of our time are walls that we cannot see but which we know are there. They are walls of security, walls of safety, or walls of privacy, but there are also walls of prejudice, walls of suspicion, walls of ignorance. When the letter writer to the Ephesians penned these words, he was talking about these kinds of walls; not the kind you can see and deal with, but the kind you can’t see, which are a lot tougher to do something about. There are walls that separate rich and poor, male and female, black and white, blue collar and white collar, educated and uneducated. There are the walls of different socio-economic classes. There are the walls that separate those who have different educational levels. As much as we might voice our concern about them, there is something about us that loves walls. We like it that they keep us in and others out; that they separate who is supposed to be here and who isn’t. There is a certain amount of security in a wall. But it is very often a false sense of security.

There is a story of a big church preacher who died and went to heaven and while there waiting to go in was in front of a short, rather loud and rude fellow. The rude fellow was the first in line, and he went up to St. Peter and I said, “I’m Joe Schwartz from New York City.” St. Peter said, “Oh, yes, we have been waiting for you,” and he was shown his accommodations; a beautiful, mansion of a place. The high church preacher thought, wow if that is what he gets, I can’t wait to see what’s in store for me. He introduced himself to St. Peter, who said, “oh yes, we have been waiting for you as well.” He was shown his accommodations and they were, well, okay, but it was a small, unpretentious kind of place. St. Peter noticed the look of concern on the minister’s face, and he asked him what was wrong. “The other guy got a mansion ...” the former minister said, and St. Peter said, “Yes, I know. You get in here by grace, but the place you receive is by results. When you preached, people slept. When he drove, people prayed.”

That preacher’s sense of self-righteousness was a wall. This is nothing new, though. The people of ancient times had all kinds of walls, too, for many of the same kinds of reasons. For the Jewish people of the time of Jesus and Paul, there was the wall of the law. The law, the gift of God to the people of God, was originally given as a sign of grace, a way for God to help people see how they needed to live with one another. But it became something else: A wall, a barrier, a means by which one group of people set themselves apart from everyone else. If you followed the law, if you kept the Sabbath, if you ate the right kinds of foods and did the right kinds of things, you were in. If you didn’t you were a gentile and an outsider. And if you were an outsider, there might as

well have been a wall leading all the way up to heaven, because a good, devout Jew was not to have anything to do with a gentile, with an outsider.

It might be easy for us to think, well, that was then and this is now, we don't have walls like that in our day. But we know that we do. We have all kinds of walls. We in the church have walls. We have the walls between liberals and conservatives; one side thinks things a certain way and another group is of course completely different and never the twain shall meet. We have walls between those who think the old, traditional forms of worship should be maintained and those who think a different, more contemporary worship style should take its place. Again, walls are up and the two sides hardly ever come together.

But the letter writer to the Ephesians says that God has a funny thing about walls. God has this habit of coming up and, whether people are noticing or not, gives the walls a great big, holy shove. Not just Jericho; how about Golgotha? How about the cross? That's what Paul wants to say. We Jews have the law, you gentiles were always outsiders. But when Christ came and died on the cross and rose again, the walls came tumblin' down. The walls of separation, the walls of hostility, the walls of suspicion. All the walls that we love to put up that keep us apart from others.

The important thing about this wall-breaking act of God to keep in mind is that it is not done by us. We don't do it by our supreme efforts, by our incredible smarts, or by our ever-persistent bootstraps. It is all gift. It is given by God. Jesus Christ is our wall-breaker. Jesus Christ is the giver of our unity. As Paul writes, "...he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father."

Not that we like that. If we say that Christ has broken down our walls, if we really say it, if we really believe it, then we have to go the whole nine yards and remember that Christ has broken down some of our favorite walls. The ones we love to put up to keep those other people out; the last people we want to have anything to do with, the last people we want in the kingdom of God, the last people we think should receive grace. Because grace, because wall-breaking, is not about us. It is about God breaking down the walls of fear so that the love of Christ can come in and take its place. It is about those of us who were far off who have been brought near by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We were far off. But God does not want us or anyone else to be far off. God has brought us near. Not by fear or distrust or anger or suspicion. But by love.

These days we have experienced a wall-breaking event. It goes by the name "The Amazing Talent Adventure." This has been an opportunity for people to break down some walls of fear about money; we just don't have enough, there's a recession going on, people are out of work, we have to keep it to ourselves. Our church has operated on a deficit budget since the year began, with a big hole that we had absolutely no idea where we were going to fill it. So what did we do? Our Stewardship Committee started passing out twenty dollar bills. We wanted people to take the money and invest it to God's glory, much like the parable of the master who gave talents to three servants. But it could also be a reflection of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The giving of money was a way for us to knock down some walls – the walls of fear, of doubt, of despair, so that the sunshine of God's love could pour in.

And pour in it did. People got really excited about how to use the money. Several of our youth were very creative about how they could participate. Folks took

their money and got so involved in all of this wall-breaking activity that they forgot about the money; they were too busy having fun, knocking down walls and coming up with ideas and making meals for other people and teaching them Spanish and doing all kinds of things for the glory of God. Which is exactly what this kind of wall breaking is all about.

I read about another kind of wall breaking in a book written by Dave Gibbons, who is the pastor of a megachurch in California. He was talking about one of the churches his group sponsors on Thailand, and of a Saturday night 'verge' gathering, intended to bring in all kinds of people, intended to knock down all kinds of walls. The pastor of that church sent him an e-mail in which he mentioned a young pastor, who as he wrote, "...has had lots of questions and I've really been challenging his old paradigms of evangelism and missions. Lots of talk and encouraging him not to be afraid of 'the world' and to take Jesus with him into everyday life instead of believing that bringing people to church is the same as bringing them to Jesus.

"So this past Saturday I was sitting near the door, and during the worship, a young woman squishes in and sits next to me on the arm of the sofa. Then another girl squishes in front of her on the arm of the sofa... Then Justin (the young minister) squishes in through the door and stands there, eyes bright and a smile on his face. He yells into my ear above the music, 'You wouldn't believe the story I have to tell you!'

"Afterward he explained to me how these two girls were prostitutes, how his colleague thought it might be funny to hook this innocent young Christian guy up with them, and poor Justin didn't even know at the time. He naturally brought them (here), cuz he knew no one could feel out of place there. They came along. They got to hear about the Father's love.

"This is a bit of a funny story, in a way, but a story about Justin's journey as well as these two bar girls. Misfits. All of us.

"From my perch on the arm of the sofa, I kept looking around the room all evening. Thais. Koreans. Americans. Teachers. Computer experts. Designers. Bar girls. Musicians. Peaceful faces. Pained faces. Even some tell-me-something-I-don't-know faces. Everything and everyone so distinct and different...

"But God is decorating that place with himself! People gathered in (God's) name are promised to see him lifted up among them. We are seeing him lifted up. God is showing God's self to be great."

When we get a little too fascinated and secure about our walls, maybe we need to remember what happened here over the last two months; and maybe we need to remember this e-mail about a bunch of people being brought near to God's love. We need to hear that God has worked it so that the walls have come down, so that those who have been far off have been brought near. The ultimate power belongs to the Ultimate wall-breaker. Jesus; the One who brought together Jew and Gentile, the one who brings together liberal and conservative, insider and outsider, the One who knocks down even our most favorite walls, so that we can reach out to others and share with them that same wall-shattering love. Amen.

Bible Text is Ephesians 2:11-22.

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