

## KICKOFF SUNDAY

September 9, 2018  
Series: We Are One

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

**Ephesians 2:11-22**

**Tear Down This Wall!**

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun ...  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall  
That wants it down.<sup>i</sup>*



***For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. – Ephesians 2:14***

Perhaps the most infamous wall in history was the Berlin Wall. The twenty-five mile long concrete barrier divided Germany's capital – physically and ideologically -- for 28 years. East Germany referred to the dividing wall as the “Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart.” West Berlin's city government called it “The Wall of Shame.”<sup>ii</sup> In reality the Berlin Wall symbolized a much larger divide between East and West, with barbed wire and parapets and steel roots running down into the sewers and concrete segments 11-feet high. Behind it was an illuminated area called the “death strip.” More than 100 people died trying to cross from East to West. I can still remember the day the Berlin Wall came down. I remember the place where I was standing and what I was holding in my hands when I heard President Reagan, on television, at the Brandenburg Gate say to Secretary Gorbachev:

“If you seek peace, if you seek prosperity ... if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate ... open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”<sup>iii</sup>

There are other famous walls, of course: the Great Wall of China, more than 2000 years old, and the even more ancient walls of Jericho – Joshua marched around them, the ones that came a tumblin' down. Today, in the Holy Land, a 440-mile Separation Barrier segregates the Palestinian and Israeli communities. The Israelis built the massive wall to reduce the number of criminal attacks; the Palestinians say that the Wall has allowed the annexation of huge portions of Palestinian land and has separated families. Next month 26 of us from Woods will be traveling to the Holy Land. We will see for ourselves the wall's impact on both, with particular emphasis on the Christian community there.

It seems that when it comes to walls, there are always bold differences of opinion. Everyone wants to feel safe and protected, so we build walls. And sometimes we build them high and wide. Some walls are huge – high and wide. Others are not made of brick or stone at all, “walls of custom and culture, walls of race and ethnicity, walls of religion, built on centuries of hostility and hatred ... India and Pakistan, North and South Korea.”<sup>iv</sup> *Smithsonian* had an article<sup>v</sup> earlier this year noting the hundreds of rare and endangered species of plants and animals that have

begun to thrive in the 155-mile Demilitarized Zone between the Koreas, a twist to the tragedy there must surely make God smile.<sup>vi</sup> Wildlife thrives wherever humans cannot go.

Robert Frost's New England farmer thought that mending the wall separating his land from his neighbors' was a silly waste of time. Nature itself fought against the existence of the wall. Why should he work to maintain it? His neighbor, on the other hand, said again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'<sup>vii</sup> I shared a room with my sister growing up; I know it's true!

Today, the wall I am concerned with is the one that Paul discusses in the reading for today. Paul says, in so many words: "There is no wall around the kingdom of Heaven."

*Christ is our peace ... [he] has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us.*

He's talking about the animosity between Jews and Gentiles, but you can substitute any other group, conflict, or divide. There are plenty to choose from: left and right, male and female, gay and straight, young and old, black and white, blue and green (just kidding, but it could come to that). Everywhere you look someone is throwing up a wall to keep "those people" out.

Paul is sick and tired of hearing how "they" – that is, the Gentiles, are not part of "us" – the Jews. In his earlier days Paul had been more Jewish than all of them put together. Paul was an expert in religious purity and the whole my-religion-is-better-than-yours thing. By the time Paul wrote Ephesians (or perhaps it was one of his disciples who wrote it, scholars aren't altogether sure), Paul had had it up to here with "us vs. them," the wall, the barrier, and all the divides the people of God are so quick to throw up to make themselves feel holy and superior.

Jesus Christ died to tear down those walls! Paul says, Christ absorbed the hostility in his body on the cross and reconciled both groups to God. Christ is our peace!

To understand Paul's message, it helps to know where his first hearers were, that is, where they were physically located as they heard this letter read in worship for the first time. They were probably in the synagogue with architecture that mirrored the Jerusalem Temple. Herod's Temple was a series of courts. The Holy of Holies was at the center; a curtain or veil separated the inner sanctum from the remainder of the Temple. Do you remember what happened to that veil on the day Jesus died? It was torn in two, from top to bottom.<sup>viii</sup>

Only the High Priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Beyond that was the Court of Priests, then the Court of Israel. Only Jewish males could enter there. Surrounding the Court of Israel was a wall with gates. Behind that was the Court of Women. This was as close to the worship center as a woman could go. Below the entrance to the Court of Women were 14 more steps that descended to the Court of the Gentiles. On the steps there was an inscription that announced that non-Jews could enter there only upon punishment of death. It was restricted.

So when Paul says *those of you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ... tearing down the dividing wall*, this is what he meant. Jesus Christ dismantled the literal barriers of segregation, but not only that, he also destroyed the spiritual barriers we so often erect – our

walls of cynicism, bias and prejudice -- that divide us just as effectively as those ancient walls. You and I choose our walls, and when we do, we deny the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Churches have walls. Today I am more than glad for some protection from the storm, but these not the kind of walls I mean. Churches sometimes have subtle and not-so subtle ways of saying who our-kind-of-people are...walls of tradition, practices, and rules. "That's not the way we do it here," is a familiar, if often unspoken song many churches sing, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Last weekend my husband and I went on a retreat with another church, the church where our daughter is Director of Family Life. Ninety of us spent the Labor Day weekend in Montreat, a stunningly beautiful Presbyterian conference center in North Carolina. We had the opportunity to get to know members of our daughter's congregation, which was thrilling. First Presbyterian of Atlanta is similar to Woods in many ways – professional people, well-educated, 2,000ish members. We had participants from age 15 months to mid-80s. The nametags helped. Everyone was on a first name basis, except for one member, one gentleman they introduced with great respect as Mr. Miller, a dignified man and very intelligent, and it turns out Mr. Miller is homeless.

He began attending the church's weekly early-morning free breakfast and prayer meeting. Then he started worshipping regularly with the congregation. Sometime after that Mr. Miller approached the pastor about becoming a member of First Presbyterian Church. He doesn't come from the same kind of faith tradition as the rest of them. When the pastor preaches or prays, he is inclined to join in, with an "Amen," or a "Yes, Jesus," and not softly. I don't know when I've ever met a man so joyfully Christian.

Years ago, the comedian, Dick Van Dyke wrote a book called *Faith, Hope and Hilarity*. In my opinion Dick Van Dyke is one of the funniest men alive. Did you know that he is also a Presbyterian elder and Sunday school teacher? In the book he tells about another Sunday school teacher who asked his students, "What do you see when the church doors open to everyone who wants to worship God here?" A student answered, "It's like walking into the heart of God."<sup>x</sup>

Church isn't like that for everyone. Someone once asked three time Pulitzer Prize winner Carl Sandburg, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?" He thought for a few minutes and then replied: "exclusive" -- just another word for walls. Paul began as a Pharisee, so proud of his religious purity – no divorce, no gays, no women, no foreigners in his religious circle. But God knocked him off his high horse, so to speak; God let him know just how exclusive he had become. In Jesus, God created a new humanity; one new humanity, healing all the divisions, making one new human race out of many who were separated and divided in the past. "It's bold, bracing theology and it is grounded in the cross. That's what the cross is all about...not a narrow symbol of exclusion and judgment, but, in Bishop Tutu's wonderful image, Christ with arms flung wide open to gather in and embrace the whole world."<sup>x</sup>

Today is Kick-off Sunday. We begin a new program year today, in one of the most fractured and divided times in American history. As I talk to people every day, something new has become clear -- people are operating with widely different sets of facts, literally different realities – there is much more *Pluribus* than *Unum* and that is a serious challenge for us.

Woods Church believes in unity. We Are One. Today's scripture verses make it clear that our unity is not based in sameness or even in agreement. Church is a place where we can safely disagree on many things. Our unity is not grounded in our opinions, our unity is grounded in Jesus Christ. Paul said:

*Christ is our peace...and in him all of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So we are no longer strangers...but citizens with all the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as our cornerstone.*

We Are One, and we will be one, in spite of evil's relentless efforts to pull us apart. We Are One. And we will be one because Christ Jesus is our head and cornerstone. We will be a voice of faith transforming lives and society through Jesus Christ. We will do that by welcoming all to grow and serve in Christ... no barriers.

There's a story that means a lot to me. I think it's true. It happened during the Second World War in France. A soldier was killed. His buddies knew that he was a man of faith and they wanted to give him a Christian burial. They found a well-kept cemetery with a low stone wall around it, a picturesque little Catholic church. This was a perfect place to bury their friend, they thought, but when they asked the priest, he told them that since their friend was not a Catholic he could not be buried in the cemetery. Sensing the soldiers' disappointment, the priest showed them a spot outside the walls where they could bury their friend. Reluctantly they did. The next day the soldiers returned to pay their final respects but could not find the grave. As they frantically looked for it, they began to doubt their own sanity. "It has to be here!" They told each other. Finally, they approached the priest who took them to a spot inside the cemetery walls. "Last night I couldn't sleep" said the priest. "I was troubled that your friend had to be buried outside the walls, so I got up in the night and moved the fence."<sup>xi</sup>

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen ground swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps...  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down.*

---

<sup>i</sup> "Mending Wall" by Robert Frost, 1914

<sup>ii</sup> Edward Rothstein, "There Once Was a Wall of Shame" *New York Times*, April 22, 2009

<sup>iii</sup> "Remarks on East-West Relations at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin" Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

<sup>iv</sup> John M. Buchanan, from a sermon "Dividing Wall," preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, July 20, 2003

<sup>v</sup> Jennifer Billock, "How Korea's Demilitarized Zone Became an Accidental Wildlife Paradise." *Smithsonian*, April 12, 2018

<sup>vi</sup> Buchanan, op. cit

<sup>vii</sup> Frost, op.cit

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 27:51

<sup>ix</sup> Dick Van Dyke, *Faith Hope and Hilarity*" Doubleday, 1970

<sup>x</sup> Buchanan, op. cit.

<sup>xi</sup> *From Our Christian Heritage*, Douglas Weaver, ed. Smyth and Halwys, 1997, 370-1