

The Walls That Divide Us (Ephesians 2:11-22)

In New York City, there's a bar that has become a not-so-well-kept secret. You go into a hot dog joint, Crif Dogs, which looks like an eccentric hole-in-the-wall joint. As you walk toward the back of the place, you see a vintage wooden telephone booth. If you step into the booth, pick up the rotary-dial phone, and dial 1, a voice on the other end asks if you have a reservation. If you do, a back panel on the phone booth magically opens up to let you into a speakeasy named, *Please Don't Tell*—or PDT to the regulars.

It's a tough reservation to get unless you call when the reservation line opens at 3 p.m. sharp on the day you want to go. Because it's so hip and trendy, *Please Don't Tell* was featured in a book on word of mouth marketing. The secret to this bar's success, according to the author, is that it confers social capital.

In non-nerd terms, if you get lucky enough to get in, it makes other people jealous of you when you tell them about it—which is its chief marketing strategy: This place is so exclusive that only important people can even get in.

It's the same strategy used to get people into frequent flyer programs. "Fly with us, and you too could be a Diamond-Platinum-Executive-Premier-Cooler-than-everybody-else Reward member. Now you can show your friends and family just how important you are: You'll get to board your flight precious seconds before everybody else after having relaxed in the exclusive member lounge, where you can look out the one-way windows on the poor saps who have to eat their \$15 tuna on rye out in the concourse like animals."

According to the marketing author, these things are a way of separating ourselves from the herd—setting up exclusive enclaves where some are welcome, while others are not, where you get to

feel like a ***somebody***, and not just a hapless stranger in a ***sea*** of strangers.

And let's be honest, feeling like a stranger in the world is the worst.

But as lonely as it is to feel like a stranger among strangers, there are even more profound ways of feeling like a stranger. It's possible, for example, to go home after punching the time clock at work, walk into the house, and sit around the supper table with a group of strangers.

It's possible to get up, put on your Sunday best, sneak in the back at 10:59, and sit around the Lord's table with a group of strangers you've known your whole life.

Sad, isn't it?

As hard as it is to feel alone and alienated among people you ***don't*** know, it's way harder to feel like a stranger to those you love.

We read about it all the time. Open any newspaper, and it isn't long before you get to an article in which people who've vowed their love are doing grave damage to one another.

He beat her. She burnt down the house. They left their kids alone in a dirty apartment for a week while they took a vacation.

And if it goes on long enough and somebody leaves, the paper will refer to the parties as "So and So, the defendant's estranged spouse."

Estranged. Interesting word. It comes from the Medieval Latin *extraneare*, meaning—"to treat as a stranger."

Humans have an amazing capacity, instead of making friends, to make strangers.

Oh, we do it all the time. Most of the time, we don't **mean** to do it. Most of the time, it's not something we're looking to do on purpose. It just happens: terrorists start killing people in some part of the world, and all of a sudden, anybody who looks like the terrorists or who shares the same religion—even refugees trying to escape the same terrorist violence that **we** don't want any part of—people just seeking a little shelter from the storm are introduced to our amazing capacity to treat others as strangers. Humans are nothing if not wall-builders.

And as common as our penchant for estrangement is in the world we inhabit, it can happen just as easily between us and God.

For whatever reason, people often live their lives as though God is hiding behind a great impenetrable wall. Try as they might, the obstruction blocks off contact with God.

And so God seems like a stranger. And it shouldn't surprise you to know that our estrangement from one another has a great deal to do with our estrangement from God. "How can we say love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love our sister or brother, whom we have seen?" is how the author of 1 John puts it.

Paul takes up this topic in our text for today. He deals once again with the problem of alienation in the church between Jews and Gentiles.

Obviously, there'd been tension. The historic aversion of Jews toward Gentiles hadn't gone away, even in the face of their newly found common faith in Christ. Paul's not happy about it either.

Interestingly enough, he evokes images of the temple in his reply to the situation, noting that Christ "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Eph. 2:14).

Let's do a little background work for a moment.

If you remember, the temple was an intricate progression of chambers, whose boundaries were established by an equal progression of walls. Outside there was the courtyard of the Gentiles—which was intended to keep, you know, **those** people out there, where they belong. The court of the Gentiles led into the court of women.

Between the courtyard of the Gentiles and the court of women, an inscription in Greek and Latin prohibited Gentiles or foreigners entry upon the pain of death.

Now, it's important to point out that the word for foreigner is also translated as *stranger*. They didn't want any contact with Gentile strangers, so they built a big wall.

But they didn't stop there, they built a wall beyond which the women could not go; then there was a wall beyond which the average Jew could not go; then there was a wall beyond which even the priests could not go, except the high priest (and then only once a year).

The little room protected by **that** wall was called the Holy of Holies. That was the room where God was said to reside. Walls everywhere. Separating. Dividing. Keeping the undesirables at a distance—from each other, and ultimately, from God.

The temple was intentionally designed to keep people far off.

But Paul says that in Jesus, a **new** temple has been built. The design for the old temple has been abandoned, and the plans for the new temple involve tearing down the dividing walls, between Jews and Gentiles, between men and women, between those who were far off and those who were near, between the stranger and the citizen, and in the final analysis, between us and God.

And so the ground is leveled, the brush carried off and burned, the foundation is poured, and the first block is laid with the name of Christ. Then other blocks are laid beside the cornerstone, with the names of the apostles and the prophets. And on top of those, blocks are laid, side by side, sealed together by the mortar of the love of Jesus and the binding of the Holy Spirit, with names on them. Your name and mine.

A new temple is being built.

In Christ, Paul says, "the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Eph. 2:21-22).

On Easter, God said "no" to the death-dealing powers that divide us. Indeed, part of the reason Jesus was killed was because he announced a new world breaking in, a completely different kind of politics that has as its primary focus the destruction of the walls that divide us—since the powers that be always have the most to gain by keeping people divided, and therefore, powerless.

There it is. That should be it, shouldn't it? We ought to sing the Hymn of Discipleship, say the benediction, and go home.

But it's not that simple, is it?

Somewhere, down deep inside us, we know it's true, but we often live as though it weren't. Somehow, some way, our world still

finds itself in the construction business. The walls have been torn down, and yet we build walls.

We've been reconciled to our brothers and sisters, and yet we often refuse to look them in the eye, content to call them (from a safe distance) foreigners, immigrants, refugees. Other.

We've been brought into the presence of God, and yet we remain far off.

Why?

In the movie *Wyatt Earp*, Wyatt's brother, Morgan, is killed by the Clanton gang. In a rage, Wyatt, played by Kevin Costner vows to kill them all. He and his gang hunt down the Clanton gang, killing them. At one point, Wyatt faces one of his brother's killers and, with a shotgun in his hands, proclaims, "This is for my brother,"

at which point he empties all the ammunition in his small arsenal of weapons into his enemy.

Now, we can understand that. Blood feud. It makes sense. An eye-for-an-eye, and all like that. The Bible is full of it. When a person did something to you or your family, you got them back.

We live in Kentucky, so know what feuds are. Our history is replete with the stories of families who spent countless time, energy, and lives stalking their enemies.

Frederick Buechner writes:

By and large most of us don't have enemies like that anymore, and in a way it's a pity. It would be pleasant to think it's because we're more civilized nowadays, but maybe it's only because we're less honest, open, brave. We tend to avoid fiery outbursts for fear of what they may touch off both

in ourselves and the ones we burst out at. We smolder instead. If people hurt us or cheat us or stand for things we abominate, we're less apt to bear arms against them than to bear grudges. We stay out of their way. When we declare war, it is mostly submarine warfare, and since our attacks are beneath the surface, it may be years before we know fully the damage we have either given or sustained.

But if ever we should look our enemies full in the face. Then?

Buechner says:

When you see clearly as that who your enemies are, at least you see your enemies clearly too. You see the lines in their faces and the way they walk when they're tired. You see who their husbands and wives are maybe. You see where they're vulnerable. You see where they're scared. Seeing what is hateful about them, you may catch a glimpse of where the

hatefulness comes from. Seeing the hurt they cause you, you may see also the hurt they cause themselves.

But the thing is, you can't see them from far off. You have to get right up next to people to see them—I mean, really see them. And by the grace of God and the mystery of Christ, we've been brought near enough, according to Paul, to see one another no longer as enemies, or aliens, or foreigners, or strangers, but as human beings, as the children whom God created and loves.

And the irony of it is, it's the one I thought was my enemy, the one whom, to me, was a stranger, who is bound with me (walls torn down) as part of the dwelling place of God.

And when I can finally see **that**. When I can finally see into the eyes of the stranger from close at hand rather than from afar, I can begin to see the contours of the face of God.

Because in the face of God, I see one who prefers to tear down walls rather than maintain them, the one who calls to us from near at hand rather than keeping us far off.

In the face of God, I can see one who is not satisfied with the distance that separates us, the distance that keeps us suspicious of and hostile toward one another—but who seeks to reconcile us, to stand among us, to bring us near enough to see one another's faces.

My hope, in fact, is summed up in the funeral anthem:

As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth. After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God. I myself shall see, and my eyes behold God who is my friend and not a stranger.

If you follow Jesus, you can't at the same time live your life trying to build walls to keep people out. You can't love the people Jesus loves from far off.

It's just that simple ... and that difficult.

-Amen.