



## SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Proper 8

23 July 2006

Jeremiah 23: 1-6

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

### BUILDING UP WALLS, BREAKING THEM DOWN

I am holding in my hand a piece of the Berlin wall,  
given to me as a gift from a German friend of our family.

For decades that wall separated families,  
imprisoning those on both sides.

I remember my excitement the day  
the wall came down.

November 9, 1989.

That was the day that  
armed guards set aside their weapons,  
the people came to break down that wall of separation,  
brothers and sisters were reunited.

The wall that had shadowed too many lives  
for too long  
disappeared,  
seemingly overnight.

I've kept this piece of cement for almost 17 years.  
It is a symbol of a historic event from the past,  
something significant that happened in my lifetime,  
but more and more these days  
I hold on to it as a sign of hope for the future.

Sadly, new walls are being built.

Even as we sit here today,  
Israeli bulldozers are clearing homes and olive trees  
in order to build a wall around the city of Jerusalem.  
This wall,  
meant to protect Jewish settlers from Palestinian gunmen,  
is also cutting Palestinians off  
from medical care,

friends and family,  
and from the olive groves  
that have been their livelihood for generations.

Closer to home,  
the United States has a wall that runs sporadically  
along the 3,200-kilometer border  
between the United States and Mexico.  
The wall does not run along the entirety of the border,  
but is concentrated in urban areas,  
a phenomenon that forces economic refugees  
who seek relief in the United States  
by crossing through the hot and treacherous desert.  
Amnesty International estimates  
that 3000 people have died  
trying to cross the US/Mexico border since 1994.

Notably,  
in both the Ephesians and Markan texts for today,  
Jesus is described as one who breaks down walls,  
ignores borders,  
and brings peace.

The division that these texts address  
is the division between  
the Jews and the Gentiles.

Way back in the book of Exodus,  
when God and Moses  
were deep in conversation on Mt. Sinai,  
God told Moses to tell the people of Israel  
that they were to obey God's voice,  
keep God's covenant,  
and be God's treasured possession out of all the peoples -  
a priestly kingdom,  
a holy nation.<sup>1</sup>

The people of Israel  
sought to obey the law by adhering to the purity code.  
However, *the law,*  
*which once praised God and served human life*  
*by preserving community boundaries,*  
*was made an idol,*  
[created a barrier,  
and cut people] *off from brothers and sisters.* <sup>2</sup>

In addition to the social barriers that existed during the time of Christ,  
very real physical barriers existed, as well.  
In general,

the Judeans and Gentiles lived in different regions,  
separated by the waters of the Sea of Galilee.

More specifically,  
the walls of the Jewish temple served as a barrier,  
as Gentiles were excluded by law  
from entering the inner walls of the temple.  
The expanse of treacherous water  
and the walls of the temple  
were both real and symbolic barriers  
between the two communities.

In the Gospel text this morning  
we hear of Christ's effort  
to abandon cleanliness laws  
and minister to all –  
whether Judean or Gentile –  
according to their need.

In the texts from this morning  
we find Jesus crossing back and forth,  
from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other,  
back and forth between Judean and Gentile territory.  
Regardless of which side of the Sea he is on,  
Jesus feels compassion for those he encounters,  
and responds to their need through acts of healing.  
As a Jewish man  
Jesus was no doubt very familiar,  
with the laws governing society at the time.  
By crossing between Judean and Gentile territory  
and reaching out to any person who came to him in need,  
Jesus *erased boundaries of cleanliness and uncleanness.*

Today's Epistle,  
written to the Christian community at Ephesus,  
also addresses the division between Judeans and Gentiles.  
The author of Ephesians is writing to the Gentile community,  
those who have long been *aliens within Israel*,  
*and strangers to the covenants of [God's] promise,*<sup>3</sup>  
to explain that they are no longer outsiders.  
Through Christ they have become *citizens of the saints*  
and *members of the household of God.*<sup>4</sup>

Following the example of Jesus in the gospel text,  
the author of Ephesians also proclaims that  
Christ Jesus is the one to bridge the gap  
between the Jews and Gentiles.  
In Christ,  
the law,  
which guides both religious and social practice,  
is abolished.

*Christ Jesus...is our peace;  
his flesh ...has made both groups into one  
and has broken down the dividing wall...  
the hostility between us...  
He came to proclaim peace to you who were far off  
and peace to those who were near...<sup>5</sup>*

I get frustrated sometimes  
reading these texts  
and knowing that  
the struggle to break down barriers  
has been going on for just as long as we have been putting barriers up.  
Jesus came to break down *the dividing wall*<sup>6</sup>  
and yet,  
in my own lifetime,  
I have touched the wall that keeps Palestinian farmers  
from their olive groves,  
I have put my fingers through the chain link fence,  
that separates me from my brothers and sisters from the south.  
And, as you know,  
these are only a few of the things that divide us from one another.

And yet,  
despite my frustration,  
I also can't help but be hopeful.  
This last week,  
while I was in Mexico City  
along with other partners in ministry from St. Paul,  
we were offered hope from the many people we met  
who are working to tear down the walls that oppress them,  
who struggle and organize,  
day by day,  
bit by bit.  
And we learned and gave thanks for the people  
in the Southwest United States  
who maintain water stations in the desert,  
and who risk arrest because they provide humanitarian aide for those who cross north through the  
desert in hopes of a better future.

I am hopeful because last summer,  
when Jan Miller and I were on our trip to Israel and Palestine,  
we met Pastor Mitri Raheb,  
pastor of Nativity Lutheran Church  
and director of the International Center of Bethlehem.  
He is a man who,  
despite the wall being built around him,  
refuses to let go of a hopeful vision for the future  
In his book, Bethlehem Besieged,  
he says,

*“Our only hopeful vision is to go out today into our garden,  
into our society,  
and plant olive trees.  
If we don’t plant any trees today,  
there will be nothing tomorrow.  
But if we plant a tree today,  
there will be shade for the children to play in,  
there will be oil to heal the wounds,  
and there will be olive branches to wave when peace arrives.”<sup>7</sup>*

And, I carry this piece of the Berlin wall -  
material proof that dividing walls do come down.

More than that,  
however,  
I carry with me the image of the cross,  
my faith in Jesus Christ,  
and my belief in the movement of the Holy Spirit.  
And I carry close to my heart  
the words we heard this morning.  
The good news that Jesus Christ came to bring peace,  
to unify,  
and break down breaks down the walls  
that divide us from our sisters and brothers.

Ephesians speaks of Christ’s body,  
broken on the cross in order to unify  
those who had been separated.  
Just as Christ’s body was broken,  
we come together to break bread,  
to celebrate the Eucharist,  
praying that the Holy Spirit will move **us**  
to continue breaking down the walls that divide us.

And just as the Gospel describes Christ crossing the Sea of Galilee,  
the liquid barrier dividing Jewish and Gentile territory,  
we enter the water of baptism,  
and Jesus Christ,  
through the Holy Spirit,  
begins the work of reconciliation within us,  
the work of breaking down the boundaries that separate us from one another,  
and from all our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 19:6

<sup>2</sup> William Stringfellow quoted by Bill Wylie-Kellermann, *Exorcising an American Demon*. Sojourners Magazine. March/April 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:12

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:19

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:14,17

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 2:14

<sup>7</sup> Mitri Raheb, *Bethlehem Besieged*. pg. 157