

9 Pentecost, Proper 11, Yr. B

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Jeremiah 23:1-6, Ephesians 2:11-22

This past week, I attended a Bjorklunden class on the European Union. It was taught by two diplomats whose long careers included the time when the EU was being constructed. And it began, they said, out of the incredible suffering and destruction of WWII, when the survivors looked around and said, WHAT CAN WE DO WE TO BE SURE THIS DOESN'T EVER HAPPEN AGAIN. The cooperative model of the European Union was part of their answer. So the week was about the same things that this morning's scriptures are about: what constitutes good leadership, what are the walls that divide us; how can we find unity within our diversity; how can we not only break down the walls between us, but also get rid of the hostility and fear that created those walls to start with. There were huge issues of national sovereignty and cultural identity that needed to be bridged. But they had an overriding goal and that was to find peace. And in the interests of finding that peace they have devoted years and resources to talking, to listening to one another, to trying to understand different perspectives, to finding common ground upon which they could build.

Last week I mentioned that some things in the Bible are timeless and these questions of the leader as a good shepherd and the quest for the peace that's to be found in unity in Christ are two of them. We talked about leadership a couple of weeks ago but here, in Jeremiah, it's raised again. Once again we hear from a prophet who's warning that the nation is going in the wrong direction, being led, not by leaders who are acting as shepherds, concerned with the safety and well-being of the people, but by leaders who are doing just the opposite – self-interested and corrupt. He reminds them that the standard is righteousness. You'll remember that in the OT, righteousness and justice are cognates; they both have to do with fulfilling the demands of relationships. So a leader has a duty to those being governed; a duty to protect, and in Biblical terms, especially to protect those most vulnerable in the society. In his book about the Middle East, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Thomas Friedman talks about leadership.

Looking at Israel's history, he points to David Ben-Gurion, one of the early leaders and says that he always thought that his first constituency was to the FACTS and the second to the people. That it was his job to find the truth and then to explain and exhort that truth for the people. It wasn't his job to adjust reality to the current mood as reflected in the polls. That sounds straightforward but it means that the leader has to be just and righteous, in Jeremiah's words. The leader has to be trustworthy and the listeners have to be attentive even if the news is hard to hear.

But it's Paul's letter to the Ephesians that I'd like to focus on. It presents us with a compelling image. CHRIST IS OUR PEACE, Paul says. HE HAS BROKEN DOWN THE DIVIDING WALL, THE HOSTILITY BETWEEN US. Christians today sometimes look back to the time of the early Church as a perfect time – all inspiration and devotion and calm agreement. The truth, however, is that the early Church was probably every bit as messy as we are today. There was a heated disagreement between Peter and Paul about what to do with Gentiles who wanted to become Christians. Peter wanted them to become Jews first, hence the circumcision language in the beginning of the reading. But Paul didn't think that should be necessary. Peter changed his mind, however, after he had a vision at Joffa in which he was shown all the animals of the earth and told to eat. He refused because, according to Jewish law, they were considered unclean. But the voice in the vision told him that what God had made clean he had no right to call unclean. Following that, he went to the house of the gentile, Cornelius, where the Holy Spirit came down upon the household. He realized then, he said, that God was giving the same gift of himself to the Gentiles that the early Jewish followers had received. Peter was able to change his mind, to expand his vision and, in conjunction with Paul's teaching, the early church was able to take down the wall between Jews and Gentiles.

Last week I said that one contemporary theologian reminds us that we should be reading the Gospel and the newspaper at the same time. And perhaps there's no passage more relevant to our time and place, than this one from Ephesians, because it seems like there are walls all over the place. Some walls have come down in our lifetime: last fall, when we were

in Berlin, we were able to see the bricks in the streets marking the place where the Berlin wall had been. That wall is gone. The wall of apartheid in South Africa is gone. The wall, at least the formal laws that supported the wall of Jim Crow are gone. But it seems like new walls are going up all the time. Recent commentators point to the fact that we are beset by a kind of tribalism, withdrawing into compounds to be with people who look like us and think like us. One Christian writer says that in our hyper-partisanship we are putting parties ahead of everything else and he calls it a new kind of idolatry in which people are finding their deepest meaning and sense of identity, not as Christians, but as members of one political party or another. (Peter Marty in *The Christian Century*)

But Paul is holding out another way of our being together. A hope of a reconciled, unified, amicable society, where everyone is united in Christ. You'll also remember that Paul talks about this further when he talks about the Body of Christ – in which there are different parts, different gifts, one could say different cultures, different identities, but that all are necessary and all are valued.

Who can think about walls without remembering Robert Frost's poem:

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 even two can pass abreast...

You'll remember that he and his neighbor meet and walk along the wall, repairing it as they go, but he gets to thinking that maybe the wall isn't necessary, since

He is all pine and I am apple orchard,  
My apples will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'

But the poet wonders if he should question that – WHY do fences make good neighbors?

Isn't it where there are cows? But here there are no cows and he muses:

Before I build a wall, I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out  
And to whom I was giving offense.

Paul's idea was that it would be the church would be the one to exhibit the kind of unity in Christ he was talking about: no walls, no exclusion. And then the church would have something redemptive to show to the world. But the church has struggled with this as well.

I recently read about two Presbyterian churches, not far distant from one another, but one was black and one white, having split during the debates over slavery and the Bible before the Civil War. The two pastors decided to have an occasional joint service, but the white pastor writes about one of his parishioners who refused to partake of bread and wine that had been handled by black hands – she ceremoniously took what was offered and then disdainfully set it down. I couldn't help but remember when I was celebrating one of my first masses in my home town and was told, after the fact, by the priest there, that he had received a call before the service by someone asking if it would be a sin to accept communion from a woman. But I'm thinking that those kinds of walls are indeed falling; even though we're still some way from the kind of community Paul envisioned. But, if you read Paul carefully, you'll note that he uses the present and past tenses: Christ IS our peace, he says. And again, CHRIST HAS BROKEN DOWN the dividing walls. It's already happened; we just need the vision and courage to live into it.

It'll take vision to both see the walls we build up and to understand the fear that makes us build those walls. And it'll take courage to dismantle them – for instance in the example about the black and white churches I mentioned, the black pastor warned the white one that the KKK would come after him and his family if they did joint services. They did them anyway. Another story comes from Jonathan Sacks who tells of the Jewish pediatrician who worked with children around the world and, as one of his last projects, created a state of the art child care centre for Palestinians

children in Gaza. He explained to people that he wanted the best for Israel's children but no less for the children of Israel's neighbors. Love, decency and care know no religious or ethnic boundaries. (*To Heal a Fractured World*)

For Paul, the church is the central thing – it's the reconciled community, the household of God and the Body of Christ. Make my joy complete, he says, be of the same mind, have the same love, be in full accord with the mind of Christ. It's a new way of being human together – seeing oneself as a member of the multi-colored, multi-tongued family called church. And it's through that family that God will flood the whole cosmos with his glory. This happens whether it's a roomful of Christians in Corinth, a few gathered in Ephesus, or even those gathered in Sister Bay, worshipping and praying together, finding our primary identity together, in Christ. Christ, who is our peace.