

A House without Walls
Ephesians 2:11-22
July 19, 2015
Northminster Presbyterian Church

Thirty three years ago this week, a gaggle of high school kids—some from Southeast Texas, some from down state Illinois—returned from five weeks as student ambassadors to Europe through the People to People program. Only two of them were high school graduates...one of them was me. It was a program envisioned by President Eisenhower. Send young people from America to Europe, including Eastern Europe, and welcome similar students from Western and Eastern European nations...We would learn about one another's cultures, we would tear down walls of ignorance and prejudice, and make the world a safer, more united place.

Page | 1

I don't know how much of that we achieved in those five weeks...but as I've been sorting through books and pictures and memories as a result of my recent move and need to downsize 51 years of accumulated stuff...I stumbled across mementos of that transformational trip, include my journal. There are two entries from that journal that bring back the most vivid memories for me...our visit to Sainte-Chappelle Cathedral in Paris and passing through and walking along the Berlin Wall.

The sanctuary at Sainte-Chappelle is perhaps the greatest testament to the genius of Gothic architecture. The one large room of the sanctuary is made up principally of light—well, windows actually. The use of exterior flying buttresses and interior arches allowed them to create a space that seems to have no real walls at all...just pillar after pillar of mostly blue light. Just being in its presence is a spiritual experience. Standing in that space, one can readily imagine why we have so often called our churches, God's House.

The then decades-old Berlin wall was another story. Ugly is the only way to describe it. It was a story and a half tall scar carved across a great city—covered in roll after roll of razor wire on top and year after year of graffiti along its surface. It was a testament not simply to the cold war of that era, but of the cycles of division that so often have marked human history. No one who ever saw that wall can ever react neutrally to the “security fence” wall that surrounds the Palestinian territories on the West Bank or the multi-billion dollar wall that is partially built between the US and Mexico. Page | 2

In both of today’s texts...houses for God and walls are on the writer’s minds. David has settled into his reign, built his beautiful palace and now notices that the dwelling place of the Ark of the Covenant...the dwelling place of the Spirit of Yahweh...is still a tent. And as he ponders whether to build a temple, he comes to understand that God does not ask of him a great dwelling place...but will make of him a great house...promising that David and his descendants will be a dwelling place...a house built by God for God’s people.

Paul is the one struggling with walls this week. Writing to the church in Ephesus, he seeks to address that scar-like wall that has divided that congregation—the question of circumcision. The issue was...did the non-Jews who were a part of their worshipping community need to undergo the various rituals that had been put in place for Gentiles becoming part of the Jewish community—including circumcision—or not? Once upon a time, Jews were Jews and Gentiles were Gentiles...at least where men were concerned. Conversion wasn’t part of the conversation...you were a child of Abraham or not. But over the centuries that had changed. Processes for conversion had become regular practices in some communities, particularly in the earliest Synagogues or house churches where followers of Jesus gathered. A Gentile could become a part of the community by first going through a

number of rituals (including circumcision for the men) and be considered a member of the community. It sounds silly today...but it was the defining crisis of the early church...did they HAVE to do that to be true followers of Jesus?

Paul, never being content to teach one lesson if he can teach two or three, uses this identity crisis to challenge the entire community. Yes, he says, forget about circumcision for the Gentile members of the community...that was a dividing line between Israelite and Gentile in the past...with good reason...but no more. Christ has made such divisions unnecessary, indeed blasphemous. He wasn't condemning one side or the other...he was proclaiming that Jesus had removed this wall between them that prevented a Jewish follower of Jesus and Gentile follower of Jesus from being one family.

Page | 3

But Paul goes them one better. What was the line he used? "For he is our peace." It sounds so simple, right? Almost a throw-away line...unless you were living in the Roman Empire. By Paul's day, even the philosophers he read and heard about were speaking of the Pax Romana. The period from 31 BCE to early in the third century...when the Roman Empire stretched from modern day Spain to the Holy Land...was a time of peace. Well...a time free from invasion. The Roman Emperors created the Pax Romana through intimidation, oppression and suppression.... and through claiming divinity for themselves. They were the sons of the Gods who would keep the peace through power and by keeping the various factions within the empire from uniting...they would keep the peace...by creating walls among the peoples...instilling fear and obedience...a heavy price for freedom from war.

Into that space, Paul boldly asserts Christ is our peace....You can almost hear the Ephesians gasping when they first heard that sentence...Paul is being blasphemous to the Roman governing

deities and revolutionary in refusing to look to the empire for safety and protection.

Paul declares...Christ has torn down walls...including a few that were load bearing...the house that was built of the law in Abraham's time had many walls...some with gates through them—ways to move from one side to the other—gates like circumcision...The house that was built in David's time assumed that God's power and the government's power would always be linked....But Paul declares...no need for the gates anymore...no need for the walls anymore...Indeed, Christ has already torn them down.

Page | 4

But what will keep everything from falling around their ears? How can a building stand without load bearing walls to keep the ceiling up? And though they were terrified and fought against those walls coming down....when they looked around...they saw the community that Christ had built around them...their own Sainte-Chappelle...where buttresses of grace and compassion, love and justice, peace and hospitality made it possible for the dwelling place of God to be a place of light...a place without division...

And then, Paul tells them...this new dwelling place...this new house of God....is y'all...all of you...

One of the other things I've stumbled across in my unpacking and sorting are my collections of poetry, including the dog-eared collection of the works of Robert Frost. I've always been a Frost reader...He had a way of speaking to our uniquely American sensibilities that seems timeless and prophetic. One of his most famous poems is "The Mending Wall." It contains those two famous lines...."Something there is that doesn't love a wall" and it's counterpoint..."Good Fences Make Good Neighbors"

It's a poem about a wall...a fence of stones...between two pieces of property...and how it keeps falling or being knocked down...and how the narrator and his neighbor year after year

walk that fence line and rebuild it where it is broken down...Why do we do this he wonders...just to keep his pine trees and my apple trees apart? Just because good fences make good neighbors? The narrator ultimately decides...

***Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.***¹

Page | 5

We've been dealing with a lot of walls of late—in the church and in society at large...walls related to race and privilege, walls of economic disparity, walls of gender identity and marital status...Some walls are stubbornly standing firm...and some falling like flags being lowered forever...Yes, in many instances, frightened, perhaps even well-intended folks are scrambling to rebuild them...afraid that the wall that has come down is load bearing and will bring what we hold dear crashing down around us.

I don't want to belittle any of the struggles that continue, or the pain that change is bringing for many...or to dismiss the fear that so many have that too much is changing too fast... But I do think that today's text invites us to look up from the rubble of the walls around us...for surely that's what the remaining walls are...rubble we need to clear away...look up and pause if we are in the midst of adding a stone or two ourselves...or if we are part of the cleaning crew for those that remain...to pause for just a moment and see the beautiful house

¹From *The Poetry of Robert Frost* by Robert Frost, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1916, 1923, 1928, 1930, 1934, 1939, 1947, 1949, © 1969 by Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Copyright 1936, 1942, 1944, 1945, 1947, 1948, 1951, 1953, 1954, © 1956, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1962 by Robert Frost. Copyright © 1962, 1967, 1970 by Leslie Frost Ballantine.

that God has built...is building...without need of those walls of separation...we are invited to marvel and remember who is our peace.

This week much has been made of the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*...essentially Harper Lee's first draft of what would become *To Kill a Mockingbird*...Much has been made of how Atticus Finch is less a paragon of virtue in this version...more human in maintaining walls of racial division in his heart. And I don't want to debate its literary merits, but I do want to draw attention to that title. "Go Set A Watchman"...it's from Isaiah...and it is featured in a sermon in the novel by the new, energetic, pastor that the folks aren't quite sure of yet...It's from the 21st chapter of Isaiah....and it's an instruction from God...Go set a watchmen to tell you what he sees...They are waiting to hear if Babylon--their great oppressor...the builder of walls upon walls...has fallen...Though I may be reading too much into it...I think it is Harper Lee's pronouncement that the walls of division she saw everywhere in the fifties are indeed falling...no...they have been torn down...by the one who has crafted each of us as a temple of love and grace...and our task is to live as though it is true...

Page | 6

That when we look around in our own lives and still see the walls...our fears for uncertain futures....our struggle to understand and best use of our privilege...the relationships that need mending or that have walled us off from one another...Yes...they are real...but perhaps, if we raise our eyes, we can see that they are actually what's left of walls that have already been torn down....revealing the dwelling place that is you...that is me....teaming with light and promise...with Christ, not simply as the cornerstone, but as the author of the pillars and buttresses...those columns of grace and hope...compassion and hospitality that can bear any weight...make room for light both to fill us...but also to shine forth from us...thanks be to God...