

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON: Ephesians 2:11-22
SERMON TITLE: “Tearing Down Walls”

We know about walls, don't we? **SLIDE 1** Here is a wall--a wall built in November, 1940, by the Nazis in Warsaw, Poland--a wall built to create a ghetto for hundreds of thousands of Jews to segregate them rest of the population of the city.

SLIDE 2 Here is a wall--a wall built in August, 1961, to seal off non-Communist West Berlin from the rest of Communist East Germany.

SLIDE 3 Here is a wall--a wall in Belfast, Northern Ireland, to separate Protestants and Catholics.

SLIDE 4 And here is a wall--a wall constructed by the Israelis to separate West Bank Palestinians from the people of Israel.

We know about walls, don't we?

SLIDE 5 Listen to what Beth Richardson says about walls: “The walls with which I have the most experience are walls made of fear, anger, misunderstanding, hatred. I build them to protect me from being hurt or being changed or being vulnerable.

“Walls feed on themselves. My encounters with the walls of others encourage me to build mine a little higher and little thicker. Others learn not to be trusting and vulnerable when they run into the walls which I have built around me.”

Beth Richardson then concludes that “Walls are part of human existence.”¹

We know about walls, don't we?

SLIDE 6 Poet Robert Frost begins his poem, *Mending Wall*, like this:

*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.²*

Frost is writing about the effects of winter on a New England stone wall. The wall exists

¹ Beth A. Richardson, *Alive Now!*, September/October 1987, 4-5.

² Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” Bartleby.com, <http://www.bartleby.com/118/2.html> (accessed June 19, 2000).

to separate neighbor from neighbor. And even though the winter freeze breaches the wall as if nature itself abhors the barrier, each spring the two neighbors meet and walk the wall to repair the gaps so that the wall can continue to separate.

One of the two neighbors believes in an old proverb taught him by his father that goes like this: *Good fences make good neighbors*. But the other neighbor is not so sure. He questions the necessity of the wall. The neighbor concludes: ***Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants is down.***

So--given all that we know about walls--what do we think? Do ***Good fences make good neighbors?*** Or is the neighbor right when he says ***Something there is that doesn't love a wall, That wants it down?***³ **REMOVE SLIDE**

Well, according to Ephesians, Jesus Christ is one who doesn't like walls very much. Listen to this reading from Ephesians 2:1-11. **SCRIPTURE READING.**

Did you hear it? The text talks about a wall--a wall of hostility--that separated Jews and Gentiles. And the hostility ran deep. Jews and Gentiles viewed one another as mortal enemies. They held each other in contempt. Some among the Jews actually believed that Gentiles were created by God for no other purpose than to fuel the fires of hell.

This wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles was spiritually symbolized by the law of Moses. This religious barrier distinguished the circumcised from the uncircumcised--the righteous from the unrighteous--the insider from the outsider.

In the temple in Jerusalem there was an actual physical barrier--a wall--that kept Gentiles from approaching the temple. The wall was marked by signs written in both Greek and Latin warning foreigners that they would be killed if they violated the barrier.

Even in the early church, there was an intense struggle between those who wanted to maintain the wall between Jews and Gentiles, and those who wanted to tear the wall down. Speaking as a Gentile, I'm thankful that the church made the choice that it did.

³ Ibid.

Ephesians proclaims it: In Jesus Christ the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles came tumbling down. He is “our peace.” In him, strangers and aliens become “citizens with the saints” and “members of the household of God.” Through his blood, those who were once far off have been brought near. Through him we have gained access in one Spirit to the Father. In him, God created one new humanity by reconciling those who were once divided and by putting to death the hostility that had built a wall of separation between peoples. Ephesians declares that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone that has joined us all together in a holy temple that is a dwelling place for God.

And it’s not just about the wall that separated Jews and Gentiles. The Spirit of Christ drove the early church to tear down other walls that divided and separated people. Listen to the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28: *For as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have put on Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

My brothers and sisters: “*Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, That wants is down.*”⁴

But now let’s be honest. In so many ways, those of us in the church--still act as if *Good fences make good neighbors.*⁵ Isn’t it true that while Christ tears walls down, we tend to build them right back again? Just look at the church: It seems to me that the division of the Body of Christ into hostile factions or denominations is a repudiation of who we are in Christ. It seems to me that the willingness of Christian brothers and sisters to break fellowship with one another over differences in doctrine, or liturgy, or politics, or over troublesome moral issues, is a denial of who we are in Christ.

And let’s go a step farther: It seems to me that since Christ tears down dividing walls, our stance toward other religious faiths should be affected. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel writes: *Once upon a time, religion separated people. A Jew considered himself only a Jew; a*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Christian only a Christian...Today, fortunately, after paying a price that could never be measured in history, we have learned that religion must no longer be a separation, but a door; no longer a wall, but a window; and no longer a back turned to one person or another, quite the opposite, an open hand.⁶

Isn't this who we are called to be in Christ Jesus? So why don't we just be who we are and practice what we preach?

Well, every now and then, we get it right--and walls come tumbling down. Beth Richardson tells this story: "Several years ago, a friend invited me to attend church with her. I put her off for several weeks, because the members of her church and I resided on opposite ends of theological and political scales. I finally agreed to go, partly out of duty to the friendship, partly out of curiosity.

"As I prepared to attend the service, I put on an armor of judgment and defense. I hardened the crust on my outsides and tensed my body for the heresies that I would surely hear.

"As we arrived, I looked around the auditorium and imagined the things that people would say about me if they knew who I was. The walls around me were thick chunks of fear, distrust, anger.

"The service began with a time of singing. The songs were new to me, but not to the congregation. Each person knew all the words to the songs and sang with uplifted heads and joy-filled faces.

"As I listened to the beautiful music and looked at those faces, something started to crumble within me. How could I feel anything but love for those people? I realized in an instant that the same God who cared for me also cared for them. I knew that we were one in God.

"A warmth like burning embers filled my heart. I cried in despair, 'My God, how can I be one with *these* people!' But it was too late; my wall had a permanent hole in it.

"I live now with the responsibility of that experience. I cannot build permanent walls of

⁶ Elie Weisel, "No Make-Believe," *Alive Now!*, September/October 1987, 50.

fear, distrust, hatred between myself and another person. As soon as I begin to separate myself from others, the memory of that experience of oneness breaks through my walls, fires the Spirit's embers within my heart, and reminds me that Christ transcends our human divisions."⁷

So now I ask you: ***What dividing walls has Christ broken down for you? What walls remain unbroken?***

⁷ Ibid, 61.