

“Walls That Divide”
Ephesians 2:11-22
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.
Deer Creek Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity Presbyterian Church
February 16, 2025

Although the 21st century technically began a quarter of a century ago with the dawn of the new millennium, historians hearken back a decade BEFORE that, to 1989--the year the Soviet Union imploded and the Berlin Wall fell--as the REAL beginning to the 21st century. Perhaps the most memorable words ever uttered by former President Ronald Reagan occurred two years earlier when while standing before the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin, he declared to the then President of the Soviet Union, “Mr. Gorbachev, TEAR DOWN THIS WALL!” And as though history HAD a pair of ears, that wall DID fall- faster than when Joshua with the blast of his trumpet caused the walls of Jericho to come “a-tumblin down.”

The birth of this new millennium augured a promise of new beginnings, an era when walls would CONTINUE to keep falling all over the world. No longer in the industrial age, we now find ourselves in the “information age,” a brave new world in which geography no longer plays quite so important a part. This new age has been brought on by the advent of computers and the internet, by the on-going revolution in the tele-communications industry, and, until at least the advent of the Trump Presidency a month ago, the tearing down of tariffs and trade barriers. As a result, we have found that the earth has gotten progressively smaller and our relations with one another increasingly more intimate.

But while nations and city-states are drawing closer together, racial and ethnic divisions continue to exacerbate. Perhaps the MOST CONSPICUOUS example of wall-building has been the 30-foot concrete barrier that Israel constructed around the West Bank and right through Jerusalem to segregate Israelis from Palestinians- a 450-mile separation barrier which Israelis say they need to protect themselves against suicide bombers and other Palestinian attackers. Along its path, the barrier has cut Palestinians off from their fields and schools, their hospitals and businesses- even separating RELATIVES from each other. For Palestinians, they see this as another example of “apartheid,” as another way to keep them socially, politically, and economically down-trodden. As a result, hatred between both sides has never been GREATER. Breaches are already being pried open and tunnels dug underneath it. The more successful the fence becomes in preventing attacks from the other side, the more terrorists will turn against the settlers living on their OWN side of the barrier. The fact is that we build walls to make ourselves more secure within by keeping others whom we regard as threats out. But rather than INCREASING security, such barriers instead HEIGHTEN our fears and betray the lack of creative and constructive engagement actually required to build a TRUE and LASTING PEACE.

Sociologists and psychologists tell us that segregation never begins with a wall but with a THOUGHT, with a mood or a state of mind. The root of evil--and EVIL IT IS--ALWAYS begins in the human spirit where hatreds and fears, mutual distrusts and misunderstandings are engendered and multiplied. The barriers themselves are just the EXTERNAL MANIFESTATION of what is ALREADY WITHIN: the wall is first and foremost in the mind

and in the spirit. Such walls that divide MUST be broken down and demolished; they MUST be cast down, destroyed, and uprooted. They MUST be seen for what they are- a DISEASE of our society, an ENEMY to human dignity, and an IMPEDIMENT to a healthy, vibrant, dynamic community. Only when walls are torn asunder can the REAL work of building a HEALTHY American society begin, and ONCE down, it must be seen to that they REMAIN down and are NEVER constructed again!

But HOW can we do such a thing? HOW can we dislodge the assorted suspicions and insecurities which crowd our heart and dominate our relationships? What first steps must we take to bring down those walls and barriers which don't alleviate our fears and make us any safer, but only AGGRAVATE and INTENSIFY them? The INITIAL and MOST IMPORTANT step is to EXPERIENCE OURSELVES AND OTHERS AS HUMAN BEINGS, that is, TO SEE OTHERS AS WE ARE OURSELVES. Before we are Americans or Pennsylvanians or Presbyterians, before we are male or female, white or black, Republican or Democrat, we are HUMAN BEINGS, part of the living order, people who enjoy an organic kinship with every OTHER human being- REGARDLESS of race or religion or ethnicity or nationality. God never created us American as opposed to French or Chinese, never made us Presbyterian vis-a-vis Baptist or Roman Catholic. NO! God has made us all HUMAN and purposely constructed us in his own image. Whether one is good or bad, mean or friendly, prejudiced or altruistic is not the issue and doesn't even matter. It is the fact that we are all HUMAN, trying to muddle our way the best we can through this crazy world and it is THAT which unites us with every OTHER living being in the world. This means that if we acknowledge every person AS a human being and AS a child of God, then it is ALSO possible for us to ENGAGE or RELATE to that other person, regardless of how different he or she might be from us.

We often experience this phenomena in times of disaster. Floods, wildfires, earthquakes, and disasters- these know NOTHING of race or class; at such moments, we become one, bound together by nothing more than our common humanity. We saw this with 9/11. When our national life was threatened, we made common cause in which for the moment, EVERYBODY was counted as an essential human being, possessed of certain resources that were needed for the survival of our common life. We experienced each other as HUMAN BEINGS and nothing less!

To regard one as a human being, to experience another AS a person, involves being able to put oneself in the OTHER'S SHOES, to place oneself in that OTHER PERSON'S PLACE. Here is where the gift of imagination comes in. Without the imagination, we would not be able to SYMPATHIZE with another individual. Without the gift of imagination, we would not be able to LOVE another for we can only love when we project ourselves into another, when we put ourselves into another's life and circumstance, when we enter into the thinking and feeling and reacting of another. Imagination is the creative vehicle that carries one spirit into the dwelling place of another. It is part of the spiritual equipment God has hard-wired us with, part of his own image IN us. WITHOUT imagination, all relationships would be IMPOSSIBLE.

As Christians, we have both the ABILITY and the INCENTIVE to rid ourselves of all

those labels we use to classify and thus segregate ourselves, to tear down those destructive walls and barriers we sometimes INHERIT and sometimes CREATE. As children of God, we are all common clay which God has breathed his own spirit into thereby making us a living soul. In our New Testament lesson, Paul is writing to the church at Ephesus reminding them that THROUGH Christ and IN Christ, we are nothing less than God's NEW SOCIETY, a single NEW HUMANITY which God is creating and which includes Jews and Gentiles on equal terms. We are the family of God the Father, the body of Jesus Christ the Son, and the temple or dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we are to demonstrate plainly and visibly by our new life the REALITY of this new thing which God has done through our common life, this NEW HUMANITY in which all superficial distinctions give way to reconciliation and hostility to peace.

In vv.13 and 14 of our N.T. text, Paul writes that in Christ Jesus, we who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ, for HE is our peace- he who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. This new unity does more than just overcome the distinction between Jew and Gentile, but in other passages, Paul says that it also does away with SEXUAL and SOCIAL distinctions. He writes, "Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all, and in all."(Col. 3:11) and again, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slaver nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."(Gal. 3:28) In other words, all inequality is abolished before God. Because he has broken down the dividing wall, because all distinctions are abolished in and through him, this means that we demonstrate that SAME unity when we refuse to regard those differences of race or ethnicity or nationality or class or sex which remain so prevalent in OUR society. When we work to tear down those walls that separate us, when we OVERCOME those artificially-created social barriers that keep us strangers to one another, we then show to the rest of the world what the kingdom of God LOOKS LIKE and how, in Christ, those barriers are ALREADY ERASED AND DECLARED FOREVER INVALID.

But as Christians, we are sometimes the HARDEST to convince and the LAST to convert. Opinion surveys consistently show that white Christians, especially evangelicals, are among the most likely groups in the U.S. to hold anti-immigrant sentiments. The Christian right has asserted the need to protect the American culture and families from the alleged dangerous influence of Islam and from the supposed wave of hardened criminals crossing the southern border. I am personally acquainted with one preacher who travels around the world speaking to scores of thousands, and yet I have heard him repeatedly refer to gays and lesbians as "fags" and "queers" who are going to burn in hell- AND SAY IT WITH GREAT RELISH AND SATISFACTION.

Like everyone else, I TOO have had to go on my OWN journey towards growth and reconciliation. In my last year of seminary, I worked very closely with the seminary pastor, Rev. Howard Rice, who in the late 70's was elected as the Moderator of our denomination. There probably wasn't a more beloved or influential figure in the Presbyterian Church (USA) than Howard Rice. Well one day, he asked me to co-chair a special conference he was organizing at the school called "Repairers of the Breach" based on Isaiah 58:12 where the prophet promised that when the exiles of Judah returned and once again walked in the ways of justice and peace,

then they would be known as “the repairer of the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell in.” The PURPOSE of this conference was to acquaint heterosexual Christians with gay Christians so that the dividing wall of prejudice and hatred between them could be torn down and new relationships forged. I told Howard that he must be mistaken, that he didn’t want ME to co-chair this gathering because I didn’t believe that gays and lesbians COULD be Christian, that the Bible seemed to clearly condemn the practice. He said, “David, that’s WHY I want you to help lead this event- because you just might learn something about them AND about yourself in the process.” Reluctantly, I agreed to help spearhead it. I made phone calls, solicited volunteers, and made and distributed posters and flyers about it.

The Saturday of the conference, almost a hundred persons had signed up with some flying in from all over the country to be on hand for it. I made sure that everyone had their appropriate name tags, that there were refreshments and desserts on hand, and everyone knew in which rooms the various speakers would be located. I was immediately struck by how uncomfortable I became greeting everyone, and would run off to the men’s room every few minutes just to wash my hands. For some irrational reason, I felt dirty or contaminated being around “these people.” But then I began talking to everyone and attending the various lectures. At lunch, I found myself wanting to hear their stories, especially where their faith and connection to the church was concerned. What I discovered was that these were people were no different than myself, that they had the same struggles with their faith and experienced the same hunger for friendship and love that I or anyone ELSE had. What I learned, MORE IMPORTANTLY than what I gleaned from all the speeches, was that we were all ONE and that we all shared a COMMON HUMANITY. I soon became convinced that one could CERTAINLY be gay or lesbian AND a Christian as well, and they were proof of it for me.

When I began pursuing my doctorate back in the early 90’s, I moved into one of the dormitories at Drew University. When I first arrived on campus, I registered, got my key, and then knocked on the door of what would be my home for that first year. The door opened and a somewhat startled man greeted me with the words: “Hello. My name is Fabrizio D’Ambrosio and I’m gay.” I kind of shrugged and replied, “Well, my name is David Wood and I’m not! Glad to meet you.” Fabrizio and I remained close friends as well as roommates throughout that first year and we spent many hours in conversation together. He was a person of strong faith and we would often talk about God, the Bible, and pray together. Through his eyes, I learned about the insults and harassment and the discrimination he was constantly subjected to, that it was not a life he would have willingly chosen for himself. As a result, the walls created in my OWN heart slowly began to crumble, and old fears and hatreds and misunderstandings eventually gave way to sympathy and love and acceptance.

Church, WHATEVER those walls may be--both in our churches and in our society--we have an obligation to help tear them down and, in the process, become “repairers of the breach.” Wherever there are walls of racism, wherever there are walls of anti-Semitism, wherever there are walls of homophobia or any OTHER “ism” in our midst, it becomes part of our calling and responsibility to cast them down, to rip them up, and then to make sure that they are never built again. But in order to DO THAT, we must regard them all as human beings FIRST, as persons created BY God and IN God’s own image. We are to put ourselves IN THEIR PLACE, to put

ourselves INTO THE OTHER'S LIFE AND CIRCUMSTANCE and begin to look out upon the world through THE OTHER'S EYES- to enter into the thinking and feeling and reacting of another. ONLY IN THIS WAY can we ever engender TRUE sympathy and REAL love, especially for persons we might view as different from ourselves. When I served the Memorial West Presbyterian Church in downtown Newark, N.J., a church in which I and the organist were the only whites, people would constantly ask me, "What are you doing at an all-Black church?" or "What would a Black church want with a white minister?" My response was always the same: "We don't see ourselves as white or Black or any OTHER color- only as human beings, as children of God, equally loved and in need of the very same grace."

This summer, I'll be returning to Chautauqua for a few weeks as I've done almost every summer for the past forty years. Last year, I had the privilege of hearing the Pulitzer Prize winning historian Jon Meacham speak on the designated theme for that week- "the Presidency." He began his address by stating that the greatest words ever written in the history of our nation are those opening lines of The Declaration of Independence, when Thomas Jefferson wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." That preamble, more than ANY OTHER, has come to define what America ideally stands for- that we are a nation that takes seriously the principle that no one person has greater endowments or rights than anyone ELSE, that we all stand as equals before God and thus we should before the law, AS WELL. He went on to emphasize how the success of this or ANY democracy is dependent upon our collective capacity for empathy, our common ability to recognize that we are ONE PEOPLE and that we share a MORAL OBLIGATION to feel the plight and pain of others and TO RESPOND ACCORDINGLY with care and compassion towards them. Before the thousands of individuals assembled in that amphitheater that morning, he concluded his powerful speech with this story concerning someone he knew well and had written a bestselling biography on. Said Meacham:

Our greatest Presidents have been those who could put themselves imaginatively, empathetically in the shoes of those he leads. I want to tell you a story about the most empathetic man I ever knew- not just President, but MAN. That person was George Herbert Walker Bush. It's a quick story about someone you've never heard of- a man by the name of Bennett McNichol. Bennett McNichol was a pretty heavy guy and a classmate of George Bush at Greenwich Country Day School. In the 1930s, there was an annual race held at Greenwich Country Day School. Young Bush was 13 years old, and he always won the race. He was about to go off to Andover when the faculty came to him and said, "George, would you mind letting everyone have a head start and THEN you go" and Bush said "Sure." So, everybody goes and then BUSH goes. And he's going through a series of narrow barrels on the ground of the playground, and he pops out the barrel and looks to his right and sees Bennett McNichol stuck in the barrel. A moment of maximum adolescent humiliation, right? You're the heavy kid. You're stuck in a barrel. The most glamorous boy in the school is looming over you. So what does Bush DO? He reaches in and pulls him out. He says, "Come on Bennett- we'll finish this race together." Sweet schoolboy moment, RIGHT? It's the kind of moment that a presidential family tells to show just how great their Chieftain is, RIGHT? But I didn't hear it from A BUSH, I heard

it from MCNICHOL HIMSELF. The guy told the story for 70 years because it was the nicest thing anyone had ever done for him.

And so I took it to President Bush while we were down in Houston together, “Mr. President, I just heard this story about Bennett McNichol” and the first thing the old man said was, “BENNETT, he loved lunch.” “Well, that’s really not the point sir, and yeah, he’s STILL big.” I said, “Mr. President, WHY did you pull him out of the barrel?” and he looked at me and said, “I’ve never been stuck in a barrel, but if I had, I’d certainly want somebody to pull ME out.” Now, it’s a really interesting answer. It’s not “I reached and pulled him out because my mother TOLD me so.” It wasn’t “the Bible TAUGHT me to do this.” It was a kind of “pragmatic empathy”- “I’d never been stuck in a barrel, but if I HAD been, I’d want somebody to pull ME out.” That’s a definition of democratic citizenship. That is absolutely essential because it is grounded in reality. It’s grounded in a recognition that we are not saintly- we are sinful. It is hard to do the right thing. If it were easy, we wouldn’t be in this mess; it would be different.

Now please UNDERSTAND this: EMPATHY is the OXYGEN of democracy. Presidents who are empathetic lead us in ways that can take us to that more perfect union. And let’s be very clear, we ARE an imperfect people. But we CAN create a more perfect union by remaining in conversation with and in covenant with this most basic principle, that IT’S BETTER TO LEND A HAND THAN TO THROW A PUNCH. IT’S BETTER TO BUILD A BRIDGE THAN CONSTRUCT A WALL. IT’S BETTER TO REACH OUT INSTEAD OF PULLING BACK.

Friends, in JESUS CHRIST, there is neither Jew nor gentile, male nor female, slave nor bondslave, white nor Black, gay nor straight. Likewise, in CHRISTIANITY, THE GREATEST TRANSFORMATIONAL FORCE in all of history, remains THE GREATEST EQUALIZER that has ever existed. May we live up to our spiritual calling as “peacemakers” and as “repairers of the breach” by tearing down those walls that continually divide us INSTEAD OF erecting them on the false promise that they will always protect us. Let us pray...

Lord, your word says, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” We all know how fear is such a powerful emotion that it can consume our thoughts and paralyze us from living fully; it can creep into our hearts and minds, whispering lies of doubt and insecurity, leading us to build walls of suspicion rather than bridges that reconcile and bring us together. As followers of Christ, keep us from giving into to such deluded thoughts and devastating passions that we might remain a people full of faith and courage and joy. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen and amen.