

PENTECOST 9B – 7/22/18
No Longer Strangers and Aliens
(Ephesians 2:11-22)

The other week I talked about our family trip out to Arizona several years ago. And, when I sat down to write this morning's sermon, I was reminded of something *else* I observed on that vacation. You see, one of my other lasting memories of our trip out to Arizona was seeing the so-called "cliff dwellings" built into the sides of deep canyons by the "Anasazi," which is a Navajo word meaning "the Ancient Ones." The remains of these cliff dwellings, which provided both shelter and storage for these ancient Native Americans, are still quite visible today; hundreds and hundreds of years, in some cases more than a *thousand years*, after they were first constructed.

Some, naturally, are better preserved than others. But, even so, in virtually every case all that still remains are the *walls* of these former structures. In other words, any roofs, doorways, and windows, along with any other wooden framing and so forth, has long since crumbled or rotted away; leaving, again, only the walls. Walls, many of which are *also* crumbling and falling down – slowly being worn away by wind and sand – but which still, *nevertheless*, mark the outline and perimeter of these ancient dwellings.

It's hard to believe, in some ways, that these ancient ruins still exist. But even more interesting, I guess, especially in light of today's reading from Ephesians, is that all that's left *now* – the last things standing – are, again, these walls. As I say, I find that kind of interesting; that *walls* are some of the longest-lasting structures we have. Hold that thought, I'm going to want to come back to it a little bit later...

Now there have certainly been some *other* famous walls throughout history, haven't there? For instance, everyone has heard of the Great Wall of China. It was built over a period of many many years, and eventually stretched for thousands of miles. In fact, not too long ago,

the Chinese government revealed new research that would *seem* to suggest (at least that's what their report said) that the wall was probably *twice as long* as was previously believed – over 13,000 miles! The purpose of this amazing defensive structure – indeed it was one of the seven wonders of the world even *before* this recent doubling of its length – was to protect China against her powerful enemies to the north.

In much the same way, Hadrian's Wall in Great Britain was built by the Romans in order to keep the wild tribes from the north from terrorizing Roman settlements in the south. It was built in the second century and ran straight across the English countryside from the North Sea in the east to the Irish Sea in the west.

Even today, parts of both the Great Wall of China and also Hadrian's Wall can *still* be seen, in fact; vivid reminders of the great lengths and huge expense that people are sometimes willing to go to keep their enemies *out*. And proof, once again, that walls are some of the most durable and long-lasting structures on earth.

Then there's a more *recent* famous wall that you may have heard about. Interestingly enough, though, the Berlin Wall, was actually built for the very *opposite* reason; in other words, to keep people *in*. As you may recall, during the Cold War, Germany was divided into East and West. And the East Germans, with encouragement if not direction from the Soviet Union, reinforced this east-west border with barbed wire and concrete barriers, including armed watchtowers, so that their *citizens* could not escape and defect to the West. They weren't worried so much about enemies getting *in*, as they were about their own people getting *out*.

People, of course, still tried, and many succeeded. But, for a generation, the Berlin Wall stood as a constant reminder and *symbol* of Cold War tensions, and this great divide between Eastern Bloc Communism, on the one hand, and Western Democracy, on the other.

Some of us, however, are old enough to remember what happened back in 1987, of course. Then-president Ronald Reagan gave an historic speech at the Brandenburg Gate – a section of the Berlin Wall in West Berlin – in which he uttered the now-famous words, directed at the Soviet leader, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” And within a very short time, the wall was *indeed* torn down...

As Kevin Baker once wrote, “The world is *full* of walls. Everywhere we go, there are fences, gates, partitions, and other ingeniously constructed barriers – all aimed at keeping something or someone *in* and keeping something or someone else *out*.” As Baker goes on to say, we often *need* walls. For example, they divide spaces in our homes and workplaces, and even on our properties. And, in doing so, they can thereby offer protection and improve organization and efficiency.

“*But*,” he writes, “one does not have to be a sage to comprehend how walls, both literal and spiritual, can lead to grief, division, and even violence. All walls serve a purpose,” he says, “But not all walls serve the purposes of God.”

Moreover, walls don’t even *have* to be physical structures, do they? In his published sermon, “Grace In The Midst Of Dividing Walls,” Glenn McDonald makes the following observation: “Affluent Americans are used to being *separated* from lower-income families,” he says. “They don’t work with them, worship with them, or go out of their way to attend the same parties.” In the same ways, he notes, “Blue-collar workers are used to a life *apart* from white-collar management. A wage earner may drive through the neighborhood of his employer, but hardly expects to be invited in for a barbecue.” He goes on, “Protestants are used to being separated from Catholics. Pentecostal church members rarely cross paths with those in Orthodox congregations... Anglos are used to their worlds *not* intersecting those of African-Americans or Hispanics or Asians.”

After reading this, it occurred to me that he was really on to something here. But, I believe, it's even *more* widespread than this quote from his sermon would suggest. In today's highly divisive, highly polarized, climate it goes much further.

Sadly, you see, Republicans can no longer communicate in any meaningful way with Democrats, can they? *And vice versa!* Liberals and conservatives live in two completely different worlds; parallel universes almost, the dividing lines are so clear-cut. As is also the case with Wall Street and Main Street; or big business and labor unions.

Nowhere is this more evident than with the issue of immigration, which is such a hot-button topic these days. People, especially politicians, talk seriously about building, or at least reinforcing, walls and barriers along our southern border. Our escalating fear of illegal aliens has even led, in recent years, to legislation requiring photo IDs in order to vote, and to prove citizenship in ordinary traffic stops by the police. And those entering or found living in the country illegally are more likely than not to be immediately deported.

And it's not just that we have different, even opposing, opinions on some of these issues. That will always be true. It's actually healthy. It's that we've become *so* divided, *so* polarized, we've built *so* many walls between us, that we can't even *begin* to discuss or debate these issues with any degree of respect or civility.

And technology has only fueled this rapidly increasing sense of division and suspicion. Cable TV, the Internet, and social media, in particular – which were originally meant to bring people closer *together* – now do virtually the exact opposite since they allow people to only listen *to* and communicate *with* those who think and believe the same way they do.

And so, within our society, the walls keep going up and the divisions keep growing. And the level of unity keeps going down, and mutual respect and cooperation keeps diminishing.

It was the great scientist, Isaac Newton, who once stated the obvious: “We build too many walls,” he said, “and not enough *bridges*.”

Well, I wanted to spend some time thinking this through, and talking with you about “walls” and “divisions” this morning, because these are the two key concepts that I want you to keep in mind, and that we need to be conscious of, in order to understand what today’s reading from Ephesians is all about.

First of all, it’s important to know and to understand that Ephesians was written specifically for *Gentile* Christians; that is, those who were *not* originally Jews. And it’s this heritage, or actually *lack* of heritage, that the author then points to when he begins today’s reading by stating, “Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth... were... *without* Christ, being *aliens* from the commonwealth of Israel, and *strangers* to the covenants of promise, having *no hope* and *without God* in the world.” Or another way of putting it is simply this: Once you were outsiders, folks; you were *not* a part of God’s family.

You see, there were these walls, dividing walls, spiritual walls even (which were just as real as physical ones), that had previously excluded Gentiles from the community of faith. It was like two completely different, even hostile worlds: the family of God... and then everybody else. Jew vs. Gentile in those days was like Republican vs. Democrat, liberal vs. conservative, Protestant vs. Catholic, citizen vs. illegal alien all wrapped up into one! In other words, it was a religious, political, and even ethnic separation and division that our reading this morning is referring to.

However, all this has now changed, we hear. “But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far *off* have been brought *near* by the blood of Christ. For *he* is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into *one* and has broken *down* the dividing wall, that is, the hostility *between us*.”

In James Michener's epic novel *Hawaii*, one of the characters – a Chinese woman named Nyuk Tsin who was one of 300 brought over to Hawaii to work on a plantation, and, along with the others, was put in the hold of the ship where they were treated more like livestock than human beings – eventually has an opportunity to become an American citizen. All her life she has sought a sense of belonging. But when she stands before the American official in her citizenship examination she is strangely silent. When the examiner asks: “Who is the father of our country?” she does not answer at first. As Michener describes it, the old woman is completely overwhelmed by the importance of this moment. And now that she is finally about to attain what she has so fervently longed and hoped for, she has suddenly lost her tongue.

Finally, however, when the examiner asks her for the *third* time, she begins to speak. And now she can't be stopped. It's like the floodgates have been opened. She not only answers correctly: “George Washington.” But she goes on to name the capitals of all the states, she explains the three branches of government, she describes the Bill of Rights, and goes on and on joyously revealing just what the good news of American citizenship means to her.

And, then, when she triumphantly leaves the immigration building a U.S. citizen, she tells her family that when you are a citizen, even the earth beneath your feet feels different. For you are no longer a stranger or an alien. You now *belong*.

Well, that's exactly what was going on for those reading this passage from Ephesians. You see, these people, who also knew full well – all their lives, in fact – what it meant to be outsiders – strangers and aliens – are now finally being told that they are *insiders*; that they have been welcomed *in*. As the letter goes on to say, “So then you are *no longer* strangers and aliens, but you are *citizens with the saints* and also members of the household of God.”

As we heard, the Chinese built the Great Wall to try and keep out the nomadic marauders to their north. The Romans built Hadrian's Wall to try and keep out the wild tribes of modern-day Scotland. And even though the East Germans built *their* wall to keep people in, the author of Ephesians was something of an ancient Ronald Reagan himself (wasn't he?) by declaring to, and reminding his readers, that in Christ the time had finally come for such a dividing wall to be completely torn down...

However, walls tend to endure, despite the passage and ravages of time, as I suggested to you at the outset. And the figurative and symbolic walls that divide racial and ethnic and religious and political groups are often just as difficult to remove as the literal and physical ones, aren't they?

But, in Christ, that's all over now, says our reading. Christ has now created one *new* humanity... reconciling us to God in one body through the cross. And so, as we heard, he came to proclaim peace to those who were once far off, *as well as* to those who were near. For now *both groups* have access to the Father through the Spirit.

In other words, Jew or Gentile, it no longer matters. We are all *one* in Christ. As St. Paul argued in Galatians 3, "...for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... There is no longer Jew or Greek," says Paul, "there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Our differences no longer matter, he says. Walls that divide and separate us are no longer binding or relevant. Age-old fears and suspicions need not have any power over us any longer.

This new way of thinking, the *appropriate* attitude, is one that was once revealed in an Ann Landers's column, believe it or not. "Dear Ann Landers," the letter began. "It happened again today. My two sons and I were in a shopping mall, and a total stranger felt the need to comment on the fact that my boys didn't look anything alike. Apparently my 6

year-old decided it was time he explained the difference. ‘I’m adopted,’ he said. ‘That’s when you have the same family... but not the same face.’”

Again, that’s exactly what the writer of Ephesians was trying to get across here as well. We may not all look alike. We may have come from different backgrounds. We may have been divided and separated in the past. But all that is over now; all that has ended because of Christ. Now, no matter *who* we are, or *where* we came from, we are all one family in Jesus Christ; *God’s* family...

Now obviously this message must have meant a great deal when it was first shared with its original audience. But the question is: Does it continue to have meaning and power and relevance and purpose even today?

Who are *today’s* outsiders, for example; the people standing outside the church, the community of faith, and looking in? Or maybe not *even* “looking in” anymore. Check this out. Just six years ago, in 2012, when Americans were asked to indicate their religious faith, nearly 20% of those surveyed responded: “None.” That’s one-in five.

Just two years later, in 2014, that figure had now grown to 23%. Or almost one-in-four Americans actually said they have absolutely *no* religious faith or affiliation. That’s the highest it’s ever been.

What’s important to point out here is that these figures *do not* include self-identified atheists or agnostics, however. Instead many of these people describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” In other words, they’re interested in God, or at least spirituality, just not the church.

And so, despite nearly two thousand years of church history and Christian ministry, there’s still a lot of work to be done, isn’t there?

A lot of people on the outside, whether they're even still looking in or not. Therefore, we have our work cut out for us. The challenge is still there. The need is as great as ever...

A story is told about John Wimber, the founding pastor of the Anaheim Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and the worldwide Vineyard movement. Wimber was once approached by a member of his congregation who had met somebody in great need. He came up to Wimber one Sunday after church and told his pastor about all of his frustrations in trying to get help for this man. "He needed a place to stay, food, and support while he gets back on his feet and looks for a job," said this member. "But I'm really frustrated. I tried calling the church office this past week, but no one got back to me at first. And when I finally got through to someone, no one could help me. So I finally ended up letting this guy stay with *me* all week! Don't you think the church should take care of people like this?" And Wimber thought about that for a moment and then said, "Well, it looks to me like the church *did*."

You see, the "church" is *us*. *We* are the church. Each individual Christian. The church is not some nameless, faceless bureaucracy or institution. It's you and me, and every *other* baptized Christian. Who have been called, by virtue of that baptism, to *be* the church, the body of Christ in the world. We are *all* "citizens with the saints" and co-workers with Christ.

We are the members of the household of God; called *in* Christ, and *by* Christ, to break down all the walls of hostility that still divide and separate people. And to share with them the good news that we are all one in Christ.

We still build far too many walls in our world, as Isaac Newton once suggested. But we will always have an opportunity to build *bridges* instead. Through Jesus Christ.

Amen.

