

Breaking Down the Dividing Walls

Sermon 35 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 27, 2019

Ephesians 2: 11 – 22

Earlier this year, HBO produced a mini-series called Chernobyl. The show tells the story of the 1986 nuclear disaster – following first responders, nuclear physicists, and politicians as they tried to contain the damage.

Being somewhat familiar with the history, I expected the impact of the explosion and some of the challenges involved in cleaning up the area. I understood the long-lasting environmental damage related to the exposure of the toxic elements to the ground, the air, and the water. But what I was not prepared for was the role that the Iron Curtain would play in the events that led up to and followed this deadly explosion in 1986.

While the series does take some creative liberties as it tells the story of Chernobyl, it serves as a cautionary tale about the walls we build up that divide and separate us from one another. Although there was not a complete, literal wall that spanned the length of the border, there was a clear dividing line between the East and West. There was no cordial exchange of ideas or sharing of information. There was no cooperation for the good of humanity. There was only political propaganda followed up with mutual hatred and blame.

In Chernobyl this dividing wall rears its ugly head by preventing the flow of communication. Once the explosion happened, community leaders insisted that this tragedy *could not make* global news. There was too much fear that someone on the other side of that Iron Curtain, that dividing wall, might know that the Soviets had made a mistake, that an accident of this magnitude had occurred. Throughout the series, that same pride and spirit of division undermines the clean-up and recovery efforts as the Russians struggle to procure appropriate tools from their side of that Iron Curtain.

As an American who only knows what history has to say about this historic dividing wall, it is easy for me to point fingers and place blame on the Eastern side of that wall – its leaders and its people for their failure to understand that the human race is better when we work together, sharing ideas and lived experiences... but the truth is, the affinity for building up dividing walls and planting ourselves on one side or the other... that is a global, human condition.

The letter to the church in Ephesus is similar to several others credited to the Apostle Paul. It contains the common structure of gratitude, theological vision, ethical teaching, and then a final encouraging word of farewell. In his lifetime, Paul founded a lot of churches, and he wrote a lot of letters to those churches, identifying their challenges and offering them advice, affirmation, and encouragement for their specific needs. Even though each of the churches are different and have their own unique issues, the letters show that there is

one cross cutting factor that seems to wreak havoc on each and every congregation: the dividing wall that stood between Jews and Gentiles.

Historians and biblical scholars know that this was not only the central issue in the Pauline letters, but this was *the* critical issue that had to be addressed if the church was going to survive its earliest days. Divisions and differences between Jews and Gentiles often appear in our scripture around the issue of circumcision and uncircumcision, which may not seem like the biggest ordeal. To us, this seems like a private matter and somewhat inconsequential matter, but if we could place ourselves in the ancient context we would understand that this was *the* hot button issue, *the* measure of commitment to God, *the* religious test of the day, *the* indication of piety, and *the* dividing wall between those who were accepted into the fellowship of religious community and those who were not.

The founders of our faith wrestled with this for hundreds of years.

It is plainly stated *in scripture* that faithful men had to be circumcised in order to be accepted into the community. Genesis 17: 9-10 clearly established this as the covenantal expectation with Abraham himself, who were they – those first century Christians – to reject that fundamental teaching? Scripture said it, they believed it. The dividing wall had been established in Torah law, it had been codified into scripture, it was understood as God's holy purpose and so there would be no compromise. The wall was firmly built on the foundation of scripture.

This specific dividing wall, the one concerning circumcision, may not be the wall that divides us today, but we can certainly identify points of contention that emerge from how we interpret different biblical laws can't we? In our best efforts to live our lives faithfully according to God's desires, we look for foundational teachings in scripture and we build upon those, doing the best we can in every situation.

Sometimes we fail to remember that each additional piece we add, each stud and nail and supporting beam, is our own interpretation built with natural elements and all of their imperfections. Sometimes when we forget this important truth, we connect God's will to the walls we build up and we fortify and reinforce them by huddling together with like-minded people on one side or the other.

This use of God as a dividing wall plagues pretty much all of Christian history and it has led the church to commit all kinds of evils in our world. Our forefathers build walls that kept out Moabites, Sodomites, Samaritans and Gentiles. Centuries later they used scripture to build new walls separating the poor from the rich, slave from free, black from white, male from female, native from foreign born... and the list goes on.

So, while Paul may have written the letter we read today to a specific group of people for in a specific time... the words appear to speak to a timeless issue.

“For Christ 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.” We read in verse 14. Paul continues to explain how Christ has offered a way of peace, a way of grace, a way of acceptance and unity beyond the walls built up by legalistic adherence to the law. As the cornerstone, Paul says, Christ joins together the whole structure and grows into a holy temple.

In one swift rhetorical move, Paul changes the framework through which the first Christians applied scripture and religious tradition to their lives. Where there was once a wall built upon rules and commitments, now there was a cornerstone, in Christ himself.

In the first century, the cornerstone was a critical piece of the building structure. It served as the primary connecting point between two walls. If the cornerstone was placed incorrectly, the joint would be off and the structure would be unstable and insecure. But placed correctly, the cornerstone determined the strength of the entire structure.

Paul’s charge to the Ephesians is to stop building up dividing walls, in fact, to tear those down and instead to build a stronger temple with Christ as the cornerstone, connecting all points and perspectives, all interpretations and applications, all kinds of believers – Jew and Gentile alike. With Christ as the cornerstone, all of these incomplete and imperfect parts could be united as one holy church.

A few years ago, Justin and I decided to build a house. We worked with real estate agents and contractors to finalize the plans. We made all the decisions we could based on what we knew and then the time came to pour the foundation. This was the most stressful day because we knew that it had to be just right, otherwise the whole project would be doomed. We watched anxiously as concrete was poured and we brought our tools out the next day or so to make sure everything had cured up nice and level. Once we got through that phase, it was framing time. 2 x 4s were delivered and then placed to frame the walls that would create the floorplan we had been dreaming about for months. As things came together, Justin and I began to notice that many of the boards had imperfections. As we went through the house, examining the contractor’s work, we became alarmed at every single nail that seemed misplaced, at every board that had the tiniest crack or spot. This was our dream house and it seemed somebody forgot to tell the contractor how important every little piece would be. After several frantic calls to the contractor, pointing out flaws in the work and asking him about his plans to fix the issues, he finally said something to me that I will never forget.

Chrissy, we make our plans assuming things will work out perfectly. We try our best to achieve that goal. But the reality is when you are working with a natural product like wood, you’re going to have some imperfections. So, you do your best. Sometimes reinforcements are needed – and we’ll take care of those... but most of the time, a spot here or dent there doesn’t impact the integrity of the larger structure.

I found such grace in those words. Grace for me and my limited understanding of what it takes to build a house. Grace for the wood and the frame that would undoubtedly be flawed but that would still build a sturdy house for my family to call home. And grace that accepted that when you're building with a natural product, you're going to have some dents and imperfections along the way.

This week officially begins our annual stewardship campaign, during which we consider all that we have, all that God has entrusted to us, and we prayerfully discern how God is calling us to give generously to support and empower God's kingdom that is growing here through the members of Greystone Baptist Church. As we consider where that money is going, we might remember the gift of this property. The buildings and the beautiful land on which they are built. We may remember the comfort that the utilities provide as we make our way to the pews each week. We may remember the rooms – and walls – which hold confessions and celebrations from 35 years of group conversations and private prayers voiced within them. We may consider the opportunity that this campus offers to us as we seek to be good neighbors to those who live and work nearby. What a gift it is to be a church here, on the corner of Lead Mine and Sawmill Roads!

As we remember the blessing of this campus, we also remember that we are called to be faithful with all that God has entrusted to us. Faithful in our care for the property, upholding it and maintaining it so that it can be a blessing to those who come after us, those whose names and faces we may never know, but those who need this place to be their refuge, their sanctuary, their well-of-life when everything outside seems to want to take that away.

...Maybe we could use our walls as an extension of God's own arms, ready to embrace anyone who walks through the doors with forgiveness, compassion, and grace that expects things to be imperfect and flawed and damaged.

Here at Greystone we like to say, "With Christ as our cornerstone, we will build a church of living stones, where every member is a minister, and is equipped to express God's love by word and deed to all people."

I wonder if like Christ, who is our cornerstone, we might build a church without dividing walls. A church that heeds the advice of the apostle Paul, recognizing that through Christ we are liberated from the legalism of our past and set free to be agents of unity and reconciliation. A church that grows and changes over time to meet the needs of the people around it. A church that finds grace within itself to accept the flaws and dents and imperfections of those who gather within it, and a church that can be a sanctuary for all people – no matter where they may have landed in our old measures of who is in and who is out.

Can we give generously to build and maintain a church that breaks down the dividing walls? With Christ as our cornerstone, I believe we can.