

Dividing Walls

Ephesians 2:11-22

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Saint Paul said: "In Christ... the dividing walls of hostility have come down."

It is an honor to be at Saint Marks UMC this morning. A few months ago Chip Hand called me and said, "Let's have lunch today." I replied, "Sure!" Come to find out that he had made the same phone call to Rev. Paul Milton. When we were all seated at the lunch table, Chip said, "I wanted to get the two of you together so that we can talk about a pulpit exchange." I said, "How about January 15th." I knew that January 15th is MLK Sunday.

The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great American; he was a great church leader, and a great Christian. It really doesn't make sense for our churches to recognize Dr. King separately. I believe that what we are doing this morning is exactly how we should celebrate this holiday. From the steps of our nation's capital, Dr. King said, "I have a dream... that one day the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

That was also Saint Paul's dream. Paul said to the Ephesians, "In Christ... the dividing walls of hostility have come down." Let me give you the background.

At the time when Paul wrote these words there was a wall between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were people who were descendants of Abraham. Jews were people who kept the covenant laws of Moses. Jews were people who had a rich and distinct culture. A Gentile, on the other hand, was anyone who was not Jewish.

The first Christians were Jews who believed that the Messiah has come. Jesus was Jewish. The first 12 disciples were Jewish. Paul was Jewish. The challenge came when Paul started preaching to the Gentiles. In those days, some said; *let those other people first become Jewish – then they can become Christians*. Paul argued against this. Paul believed that if Christ has come to a person through the Holy Spirit, then it doesn't matter. We are all new people in Christ. We are one in the Spirit – one in the Lord. At the Jerusalem Conference the early Christians agreed. Therefore, Paul said to the Galatians, "In Christ there is no male or female, slave or free, Jew or Greek, for all are one in Christ." And in our passage of scripture, Paul said to the Ephesians, "In Christ...the dividing walls of hostility have come down." But my question is how does that play out in our world today?

I want to make a thesis statement, then I will give a couple of examples outside our culture, then I promise that I will bring it back to MLK Sunday. Here is my thesis statement: *As Christians we of all people should be brothers and sisters, then we can model and witness unity to the world.*

A couple of weeks ago I told the people of Providence about a phone call I received. I was having dinner with my family when the telephone rang. It was a telemarketer inviting me to sign up for a credit card. I noticed that the man had an accent so I asked him where he was calling from. He said "Dublin." I asked, "Are you calling me all the way from Ireland to sign up for a

credit card?” He said, “Mr. Fitzgerald, we are calling people of Irish decent because the proceeds from this card go to benefit Ireland.” I said, “I’m not interested.” I didn’t know if the proceeds benefited Ireland, or the Irish Republic Army, or whatever.” He said, “Oh but Mr. Fitzgerald, we are brothers. We Irishmen need to stick together and this is for a very good cause.” I said, “I am not your brother and I am not Irish. I am American.” He said, “Oh but with a name like Fitzgerald there has to be a wee bit of the Emerald Isle in you.” I said, “My name is Irish, but if you look at my family tree there are all sorts of nationalities mixed up in me. I am a mutt. I am a red-white-and-blue American mutt!” He said, “Mr. Fitzgerald, how long have you been living at your current address.” I said, “I’m not going to answer that.” He said, “And what would be your annual income.” I said, “I am not going to tell you my annual income because I am not interested in what you are selling.” This guy would not stop. As long as I was on the phone, he was going to ask questions. Finally, he asked, “Mr. Fitzgerald, what would your occupation be?” I said, “I am a United Methodist Minister.” And there was dead silence on the other end of the phone. “Ahhhh” (can you guess what was happening?). I said, “Let me guess. You must be Irish Catholic and you think that I am Irish Protestant.” He said, “The thought crossed my mind.” I said, “*Then we are brothers!* We are both Christians. We both belong to Jesus Christ. That supersedes nationality. That is more important than politics, or national agendas, and certainly more important that proceeds from a credit card. No, no, no, don’t hang up the phone. The conversation just got interesting.” He spent the first part of that phone call trying to convince me that we were brothers because my name is Irish. I spend the second part of that call trying to convince him that we are brothers because we both belong to Jesus Christ. That is what Paul is saying to the Ephesians. “In Christ...the dividing walls have come down.”

I will give you another example. I have been fortunate to be able to travel. I usually don’t talk about this because most people never get the chance to go some of the places I’ve been. But I will tell you that I have been to Israel. If you go to Jerusalem today you will discover that they have walls. I’m not talking about the stone walls that surround the city. I’m talking about invisible walls and lines of separation. There are no signs that say, “Jews only” or “Palestinians only.” But the invisible lines are there and they know where they are.

For example; In 2000 Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was at the Wailing Wall, then he walked up a flight of steps that lead to the El Asq Mosque. He walked about as far as from this sanctuary to the street, but he knew that he was crossing a line when he did it. It started what Palestinians called the Infatata – the uprising, and today, 12 years latter, only now are they beginning to come back to the peace negotiations.

So, late that night I was in a hotel on the West Bank. Some of us could not sleep because of Jet lag. So we went out in the lobby and started playing cards. Just so that you will know; we were playing spoons. Have you ever played spoons? If you have 8 people, you put 7 spoons on the table. Then you pass the cards around the table as fast as you can and when someone gets 4 of a kind, that person quietly picks up a spoon. Everyone else grabs for a spoon and whoever doesn’t get a spoon is out. We didn’t have eight people so we invited the Palestinian hotel staff to join us. We had a blast. We had those Palestinian guys diving for spoons. We were laughing and joking and becoming friends – except for one. There was one fellow who was standing in the shadows sternly watching. Around midnight this guy stepped from the shadows, pointed his finger at me, and said, “Why do Americans always support the Jews?”

I said, “Look, I’m just a tourist. No one in America asks me about foreign policy. I don’t know. I’m just a tourist.”

He said, “No, you are an American. Answer the question!” And immediately the room fell silent and an invisible wall of hostility came between us.

So I said, “I am an American because I was born in America and I love my country like you love yours. But if you are going to get mad at me, then get mad at me because I am a Christian. That is why I am here. In the 4th chapter of John, Jesus Christ encountered a woman from Samaria. There was hostility between Jews and Samaritans in those days but Jesus talked with this woman about sharing a cup of water. The woman asked him, ‘my people worship on this mountain (Mt. Gerisem) - your people worship on that mountain (Mt. Zion) - where is the right place to worship? Jesus said, the time is coming and is now when true believers will worship in spirit and in truth. So, I don’t care what mountain belongs to whom. I don’t care about where the lines are drawn. I care about Jesus Christ and offering him to the world. So if you are going to get mad at me, then get mad because I’m a Christian. That is why I am here.’”

He thought about this and said, “I’m a Christian.” And I said, “Then we are brothers. We belong to Christ. That supersedes nationality and politics and whatever we think might divide us. We are one in the Spirit we are one in the Lord.” He thought about this and he smiled. And I smiled too. Whew!

It is not hard to find things that divide us. But it is the work of the Holy Spirit to unite us. Paul said, “In Christ... the dividing walls of hostility have come down.” These examples are outside our culture because it is easy to look at people from Ireland and say, “Why are those people divided – they are Christians.” It is easy to look at people at the Middle East and say “Well, those people have been fighting for 3000 years – or more.” It is easy to see walls in other cultures. But can we talk honestly about the lines and dividing walls in our own culture?

Dr. King talked about the legacy of slavery and the walls of segregation. Acknowledging and owning the truth, combined with seeking and offering forgiveness is where the journey to reconciliation begins. I am amazed at what has happened in South Africa after the fall of Apartheid. South Africans are building a nation together, but it began with truth and reconciliation. The same thing is happening today in Rwanda. Dr. King began that journey here in our country and he set an example for the world. We need to continue his dream.

Yesterday at the Dream event I was sitting beside a young man from Gastonia and I said, “I’m 50 years old and you are 17 – what is your perception of how far we have come in fulfilling Dr. King’s dream?” He said, “We teach it in our schools, but we need other institutions to embrace this.” I said, “How about the church?” It has been said 8:30 and 11:00 on Sunday mornings are the most segregated hours in America. This should not be so. As Christians, we of all people should practice unity. We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Dr. King spoke to our nation, but I am speaking to brothers and sisters in Christ this morning. If we can practice the unity we profess, then we can be a model and witness to the world.

One final thought: One night years ago I was in a meeting that started to get heated. Some were for it – they were against it – so it became us against them. Do you have meetings like that here at Saint Marks? So I was sitting there wondering how long I should let this go on when Mrs. Mary Glenn stood up and said, “Look ya’ll, we are going to have to get along when we get to heaven so we might as well start working on it now.” Then she sat down. Immediately the walls of hostility came down and unity began to immerge. I feel that way this morning. We belong to Jesus Christ and we are all going to heaven. We are going to spend eternity together. So I say, let’s join together now (not just on January 15th - lets join together in our hearts) and show the world how to do this.