

Tear Down That Wall (18July21)
Ephesians 2:11-22

To get us going on breaking down dividing walls, here's an excerpt from Ched Myers, a favorite thinker and proponent of Christian nonviolence:

The U.S.-Mexico border fence, erected the same year the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, poignantly symbolizes the social architecture of division that defines our world. But when barriers are built by the strong and wealthy to keep out the vulnerable and the poor, they will always be transgressed by those desperate to survive. The border wall reminds us that there have always been two Americas: one of inclusion and one of exclusion. The [exclusive dividing wall] was articulated in a Constitution that originally enfranchised only white landed males, and has been consolidated through [broken treaties], Jim Crow segregation, Gilded [sic] Age economic stratification, restrictive housing covenants, and laws precluding gay marriage.*

An interesting note: this happened to be written back in 2009.

I'd suspect that among Advent and the MCC, there's broad resonance with this take on things, declaring as wrong those who are practicing exclusion. It's probably a pretty typical sense in Madison as a whole. And even across America, it's a majority viewpoint.

And yet, since Ched Myers is writing about our Ephesians passage, we need to be careful about how or why it's stated. I don't disagree with his politics, and generally find him to be insightful and motivating. But to talk about Ephesians against exclusion, in our time it can function as its own kind of dividing wall, allowing us to feel good about ourselves because—unlike those other people who want to build walls—we're the ones who actually read the Bible and prefer to tear down walls. That's the first problem.

The second problem is his paragraph doesn't mention Jesus. Simple inclusivity becomes the focal point, without grounding in Jesus. It could imagine that our nation is the venue for this to be worked out, falling into the trap of viewing

America as bringing about God's plans. But that's not what happens in Ephesians. What overcomes the divisions and brings peace is not America or our efforts at justice. What inaugurates peace and reconciliation is Jesus, notably who was killed by the empire.

We may find all the projects to counteract what's broken in our nation to be worthwhile and important. Of course it has political implications to say that people are no longer aliens but are now citizens. That old language and imagery of Ephesians carries substantial weight in our country now.

But still more than questions of what happens at a border is the fundamental message that the hostility is ended and peace is enacted through Jesus himself, for those who are far off and those who are near. If the message isn't about Jesus, we miss our grounding. We may still do some good around the edges, but our politics wind up obscuring what Jesus has done and make it about us, which is inevitably bound to fall short.

So it's not about how many walls we've torn down, comparing ourselves against the excluders. That only manages to erect one new kind of wall, finding an Us vs a Them. Rather, the message remains on Jesus. As Paul would say this, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1Cor2:2). He didn't come so that we could be a bit better at not excluding people. That keeps ourselves and our viewpoints at the center. Jesus came to make one new humanity in place of the old divisions.

Ched Myers later writes, "Members of this 'church without walls' cannot, by definition, cooperate with any of the myriad social constructions of enmity—nation, gender, class, race, or sexuality. Despite the fact that walls still exist in the world, Christians should live as if they have been torn down" (93).

Culture seems determined to divide, but we know that all existence is defined by Jesus and formed into the new humanity that God desires. All too obviously, even inside the church we are stuck

* *Ambassadors of Reconciliation Volume 1: New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking*, Ched Myers & Elaine Enns, p82-3

still doing way too much with divisive definitions and operating with tribal like-mindedness, so we can only pray that God keeps forming us, both in church and outside.

Though probably I shouldn't even be making that distinction between inside and outside church.

To view this another way, we can look to Samuel Dean. As we celebrated Sam's baptism, there has been a view that baptism is what brings a person into the church. It has even been the ultimate and eternal version of becoming an insider, from being left out of God's grace and instead entering the ranks of those eligible to get into heaven. Talk about exclusion and inclusion!

Certainly we're happy to have Sam's smiling presence with us, and celebrate an ongoing connection as we remembered his great-grandmother Jean Loichinger yesterday, and we're grateful for all children among our gatherings. But God doesn't love him just because he's a cute little baby, or because he may grow up to be a doctor like his father or public defender like his mother or a loving parent or something helpful. Ellen and Yoshi have talked about this being a place where Sam will know love, apart from any of his achievements. Before all of that and entirely regardless of who he is or will or won't become, this baptism declares God's love for him simply because that's who God is, and in order that that love may continue forming him into God's new humanity.

Baptism doesn't change that. It doesn't make him an insider. It's not making him a member of a special club called the church. It simply declares God's love and this reconciling peace for him. It is an assurance that the walls have been broken down. This is really just where we happen to be for the opportunity to proclaim God's love and peace, specifically for Sam but not at all exclusively for him. God would just as much want to proclaim peace for him if he were far off.

And that's our message, not that we are a collection of folks who are especially good at or interested in tearing down walls, but that ultimately it has already been done by God on the cross, for Sam, for us, and for all. So Jesus has put hostility

to death, freeing us from that confinement in order that we might live together as a new humanity. That's building something that is big and beautiful.