

THE PRINCE OF PEACE
Ephesians 2:11-22

“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.” What a remarkable assertion! The Ephesian letter insists that something happened in Jesus Christ to bring reconciliation between God and humanity. And not only that, but also reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles, two groups famously hostile to each other. Mutual estrangement is buried at the cross. Peace is declared and hope is possible for a new humanity. Peace at last because Christ is our peace. Christ-the Prince of Peace for all of humanity.

That is the glad tidings of the Ephesian letter. The estranged state of Gentiles has been overcome in Christ. Ephesians paints a bleak picture of the status of Gentiles outside of Christ. They are the “uncircumcised”, meaning they are excluded from citizenship in Israel, barred from the covenant promises. They were without hope and without God. Ephesians calls them strangers and sojourners-far off and forgotten. The Gentiles are described as hostile to God and certainly hostile to the Jewish people.

And that estrangement is described as a dividing wall of hostility. That wall has been understood in various ways. The New Testament scholar Markus Barth suggests four possible meanings of that dividing wall of hostility. It may refer to those dividing walls within the temple precincts at Jerusalem. Walls that separated the priests from the people as well as the Jewish men from the Jewish women and children. Finally the wall that strictly forbid Gentiles from entering into the Court of the Jews.

In fact, Paul was falsely accused of bringing Trophimus the Ephesian, a Gentile, across that barrier in the temple. That’s when Paul was almost stoned for this capital offense. If the Roman soldiers had not detained him, Paul would have surely died right then and there. The temple was a partitioned holy place, much as Jerusalem is to this day.

A second possible meaning for the wall is that curtain which separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. Only once a year on Yom Kippur the High Priest would enter that holiest place and offer a sin offering for the people. This curtain represented a wall separating God from the people.

A third possible meaning is the Law of Moses itself. Even though the law sought to bring reconciliation between God and humanity, it clearly failed. As Paul always insisted, the law ended up driving a wedge between the people and God. Why? Because the law could not offer full and complete forgiveness. Furthermore, the law incited us to sin and rebel. In other words, the law says, “Don’t eat of that tree”, yet we tend to grab that forbidden fruit as fast as we can. The law ends up standing between God and us with its never-ending word of judgment. That is the wall of guilt.

A fourth meaning may be what Ephesians in the sixth chapter calls the “principalities and powers”, those dark demonic forces that the First Century world so feared. Thus the wall represented a spiritual power that stood between God and us.

However you understand the dividing wall of hostility, one thing is clear. That wall separates us from God and it stands between us and the rest of humanity. It leaves us isolated and alone and afraid. The wall is a terrible barrier. This is not “good fences make good neighbors.” This is a wall that makes us estranged and hostile and forlorn.

My understanding is that the only human made object that can be seen from space is the Great Wall of China. I have been reading a lot about China in preparation for the Synod mission trip there in October. The Great Wall was built over a thousand-year period from the Fifth to the Sixteenth Centuries. It covers over 4000 miles along the northern border with Mongolia. The Wall is an astonishing sight, one that many of you have seen and one that by God’s grace I hope to see this fall.

But that wall is more than a tourist attraction. It is also a remarkable reminder of the long-standing hostility between the Chinese and the Mongolians. You may recall that that wall did not stop the Mongolians. They conquered China in the Thirteenth Century under Genghis Khan and later Khubilai Khan. So much for an impregnable wall! But that wall reminds us that there are ancient hatreds and suspicions. Just consider the contemporary wall that cuts through Israel and Palestine. Ancient foes, ancient walls.

In his marvelous book **China Road** the NPR reporter Rob Gifford chronicles his three thousand-mile trek across China in the summer of 2005. Gifford visited the western end of the Great Wall at Jiayuguan (pronounced Jah-you-gwan). It is a massive fort one-mile in circumference that was first built in 1372. The walls of this fort are sixty feet tall. The Chinese long considered this fort to be the end of civilization, the last outpost holding back the barbarians beyond the wall. In fact, the Chinese character for those

living beyond the wall is a dog. And indeed those outsiders were considered less than human-barbarians, dogs.

But something remarkable happened in 1760 that sought to change all that. The Qianlong emperor sent a large Chinese army beyond the wall to conquer the largely Muslim Turkestan population. Once they were conquered the emperor eliminated the Chinese character for barbarian from the dictionary. Now they were no longer dogs, they were subjects, tax paying subjects.

By the way, after that Eighteenth Century conquest the Great Wall of China fell into disrepair. Why? Because China's new imperial boundaries stretched well beyond the Great Wall into what is now the northwest part of China. That area is dominated by the massive Gobi Desert, about which the Chinese say, "You would not force your worst enemy to cross the Gobi in the dead of summer or the dead of winter."

Now this conquest didn't mean these subject peoples were docile. No, there was a Muslim uprising in the northwest part of China in 1877. This is when the Chinese majority began forcing their language and culture upon the restive subject peoples. When the Communists won in 1949, the northwest became the destination for political prisoners. In more recent years the Chinese have invested heavily in this area hoping to co-opt the people with the promise of good paying jobs. By the way, this policy has not been entirely successful as witnessed by the recent riots of the Uighur (pronounced Wee-gur) minority group in northwest China. News reports indicate at least 200 people have died. The ethnic and political turmoil remains unresolved at this point.

Gifford makes this comment about the Great Wall and its current symbolism: "The Great Wall, built to keep the Chinese separate from the 'barbarians' may be crumbling in these far western outposts, but the Great Wall in people's minds, the division between different peoples, is far harder to destroy, for both the Muslims and the Chinese." The Great Wall tried and failed to keep out the Mongols. But still a great wall stands between the Chinese and their restless Muslim minority in the desert northwest of that vast land.

Gifford tells a remarkable story of three British women who tried to break down that ancient hostility. Mildred Cable, and two sisters Francesca and Eva French were converted to Christ in their early twenties. They soon thereafter felt a call to bring Christ to China. These early 20th Century Christian missionaries went with the China Inland Mission to Jiayuan (pronounced Jah-you-gwan), that fortress on the west end of the Great Wall.

They traveled in a mule cart pulled by their trusty donkey Molly. The year was 1923. The conditions were incredibly primitive and difficult.

When they saw the massive fort, they announced to its inhabitants that they wanted to move beyond the wall into the Gobi Desert. The local folks tried to convince these women that outside there were still barbarians. And if the desert did not destroy them, then the demons surely would. These three Christian women were told that beyond the Great Wall there was only danger and indeed death. But these women, often called The Trio, simply answered, "Some who are lost are out there." They felt compelled to go and share the Good News of Christ and to offer their medical care for those who were ill.

The Trio went beyond the Great Wall into the Gobi Desert and ministered in these very poor villages from 1923-1936. They made it a point to exit the West Gate of the old walled fort to symbolize their commitment to the people of the desert. Not barbarians, not dogs, not Turkestans or Mongols, but sisters and brothers for whom Christ died. Indeed, they wrote beautiful books about the Gobi desert and its people and culture. They shared Christ with others, they tended to them in their illness, and they befriended the people.

They did what the church of Jesus Christ has always been called to do. Go beyond the walls, indeed, break down the walls of hostility, and preach the peace of Christ to those who are far off and to those who are near. Ephesians reminds us, "He is our peace...he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us...he has made peace...he proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near." Christ is our peace. In China and in America and throughout the world. He is still breaking down walls of hostility. Christ is still the Prince of Peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.