

Thirty-five years ago, in 1989, the Wall came down. The wall that divided east from west in Berlin, the wall that separated sibling from sibling, parent from child, neighbor from neighbor, friend from friend, was razed. Two years after President Ronald Reagan stood at the Brandenburg Gate and said, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall,” it was torn down. The wall that divided the protagonists in the Cold War, that separated the communist Soviet Union from the democracies of Western Europe, that sealed off cities and nations and ideologies—and families—came down. The Berlin Wall, which seemed as though it would stand forever, was torn down.

What are the walls in our own nation, in our own time? What divides us? Well, what doesn’t divide us, these days? TV and radio and the internet and social media offer us our choice of news outlets, which split us from one another, into old and young, rich and poor, Republican and Democrat, rural and urban. We are divided by walls built on age, gender, sexual orientation, income, race, and politics, to name a few. What walls need to be torn down for us?

In today’s second reading from Ephesians, we hear about another wall, a wall that was torn down 2,000 years ago. “Christ Jesus... has broken down the dividing wall,” writes the author of Ephesians, continuing, “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. [He reconciled] both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” What was this dividing wall, and who was on each side? Who were the two groups? What kept them apart, and what was the hostility between them?

The two groups were, of course, the Jews and the Gentiles, the non-Jews. The early church, to which the letter to the Ephesians was addressed, included people who were Jewish and people who were not. Some of the Jews in the church kept the Jewish law, but the Gentiles and some of the Jews did not. For men, that meant circumcision, the slitting of the foreskin of the penis in a religious ceremony eight days after birth. For all, it meant attention not only to the Ten Commandments but to all 613 laws in the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, which included rules governing food, clothing, ritual purity, and all sorts of facets of daily life.

Righteous Jews of the first century did their best to avoid Gentiles not merely because they were “different” or “outsiders” or “foreigners,” but, more significantly, because, for them, Gentiles were unclean. A Jew who encountered a Gentile had to go through a purification ritual before entering the temple, so as not to bring any impurity into the temple. A righteous Jew avoided contact with Gentiles or contact with anything a Gentile had touched.

This was a challenge for the early church. Nearly all of the followers Jesus gathered were Jews, and every one of the twelve disciples was a Jew. But some of those who recognized Jesus as the Messiah, like the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman whose daughter Jesus grudgingly healed or the centurion who witnessed to Jesus at the cross, were Gentiles. Once both Jews and Gentiles gathered in the early church, there was conflict over their identity as followers of Jesus. The conflict, the hostility, the “dividing wall” for the early church was the controversy over how Gentiles could enter the church, over whether a Gentile first had to become Jewish in order to follow Jesus, whether they needed to adhere to Jewish law before being welcomed into the Christian community.

Some righteous Jews who had begun following Jesus determined that any Gentile who wanted to follow Jesus had to become a Jew first. They taught that a non-Jew had to follow purity regulations before being admitted into the Christian community. In their opinion, a male Gentile had to be circumcised before he could be baptized. But even among the all-Jewish leaders of the early church, there were other followers of Jesus who disagreed with this policy of what Paul called “the circumcision party.” Some Christian Jews believed that forcing adherence to Jewish law undermined Christian faith, because it required believers to earn God’s grace. This early controversy in the church came to a head when the leaders of the church gathered in Jerusalem, as reported in Acts 15, during which Peter said, “God has made no distinction between the Gentiles and us Jews. On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” At this “Jerusalem Conference,” the leaders of the church agreed that Gentiles could enter the church on the same footing as the Jews. Rather than converting to Judaism first, they could be baptized upon believing. Baptism was a gift of God’s grace, not something one had to earn.

So, three decades after Jesus’ death, Paul writes to the congregation in Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey), “at one time you Gentiles by birth... were... without Christ... But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For [Jesus] is our peace; “in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall [of] hostility between us Jews and you Gentiles. He has abolished the law..., that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross. [He] came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, you Gentiles who were far from God and the Jews who were near to God; for through him both of us, Jew and Gentile alike, have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then, you Gentiles are no longer strangers, [but now] members of the household of God.”

Do you experience this oneness in the church? Have you experienced one new humanity? Have you witnessed God making peace, God reconciling us to God and to one another? Or do you and I encounter walls that divide us, barriers that separate us in church?

At Salem Church in Toledo, where I served for nineteen years, there were many walls, many divisions... the traditional members and the neighbors, the employed and the unemployed, those who worshipped on Sunday and those who worshipped on Tuesday, the retirees and those on public assistance, the young and the old, “the old guard” and “the newcomers,” to name a few. Oh, and of course, being located, as Toledo is, between Ann Arbor and Columbus, there’s that wall between the Buckeyes and the Wolverines! What are the walls that divide our congregation of King of Kings?

There are walls that divide our ELCA as well. Since 1988, when our church was formed, we have been divided over how to relate to our full communion partners, such as the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the United Methodist Church. We have also been divided by differences in our preferences about worship—about hymns and hymnals, digital screens, organs, guitars, and liturgical language—and on a variety of social issues such as abortion, immigration, welfare, civil rights, and sexuality.

My favorite section of “The Lutheran” magazine, which is now available only on-line, is the letters to the editor. Often, opinions expressed are polar opposites to one another, and some writers seem convinced that theirs is the right opinion and the only opinion that God recognizes. When I read these letters to the editor in “The Lutheran,” I am reminded that the ONLY thing that holds us together

in the ELCA is Jesus! Not history, not politics, not polity, not worship style, not positions on social issues. Only Jesus puts to death the hostility between us in the ELCA; only Jesus breaks down the dividing walls that separate us.

Jesus, you see, is what unites us. Jesus creates in himself one new humanity instead of the two, whether the “two” are differences in race or age or gender or culture or income or education or opinion. Jesus reconciles all of us to God and then reconciles us to one another. As the cornerstone of the church, Jesus sets the pattern for the church, establishes the model of what life in the church looks like—kind of messy, because all of us are in it together, just as we are. Jesus’ action on the cross reconciles groups in the church to God in one body through the cross and puts to death the hostility between us. Jesus breaks down the dividing walls of hostility, no matter what they are made of, no matter who they separate.

Some years ago, I was at a “Bed and Breakfast” when my host began talking about a book she had read recently by Tony Campolo, a popular Christian author. She commented: “He almost made me think, ‘Maybe you don’t have to be a Republican to be a Christian.’” Hmm. Maybe you don’t have to be a Republican—or a Democrat—to be a Christian. Maybe you don’t have to be German or Scandinavian to be a Lutheran. In today’s Gathering Hymn, composer Marty Haugen suggests that maybe you don’t have to be lost or forsaken, blind or lame, to be a Christian; maybe you don’t have to be young—or old—or middle-aged. Maybe you don’t have to be rich or haughty, proud or strong. Maybe you don’t have to be poor or modest, humble or weak to be a Christian. Maybe, just maybe, you don’t have to be—or do—anything! Because Jesus gathers you, just as you are, with all the others, just as they are.

That, you see, is the good news. At the Jerusalem Conference reported in Acts 15, the Jewish leaders of the early church unequivocally agreed that you didn’t have to become Jewish to become a Christian. When Jesus gathered people, he took them as they were; they didn’t have to be—or do—anything! The writer of Ephesians tells us: “Jesus has proclaimed peace to you, whether you have been far off or near. Jesus has reconciled you to God. Jesus has given you access to God. Jesus has broken down the walls that separate you from God, the walls that divide you from God’s abundant grace.”

Thomas Troeger paraphrases this message from the author of Ephesians in his hymn “O, Praise!” We sang it before and after the gospel, and we’ll finish singing it in a moment. In each verse, he offers a different image of God breaking down walls, with gracious power, persistent truth, inclusive love, faith, and the tide of grace. Indeed, God’s work in Jesus to reconcile us is gracious power that wields a wrecking ball against the walls that divide us, persistent truth that knocks a hole in those walls, inclusive love that breaks them in pieces, faith that tumbles them down, and grace that tears down the last remnant, until all that remains is dust.

“Christ Jesus... has broken down the dividing wall,” writes the author of Ephesians. Not just a wall that divides east from west or separates economies or ideologies, but the wall of sin, of evil, of death, the wall that separates us from God. Jesus has torn down the dividing wall, the wall that keeps you from God—and from one another. Jesus reconciles you to God—and to one another. Jesus breaks down the wall and brings peace for you and for me and for all the world. AMEN